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(see page 65)

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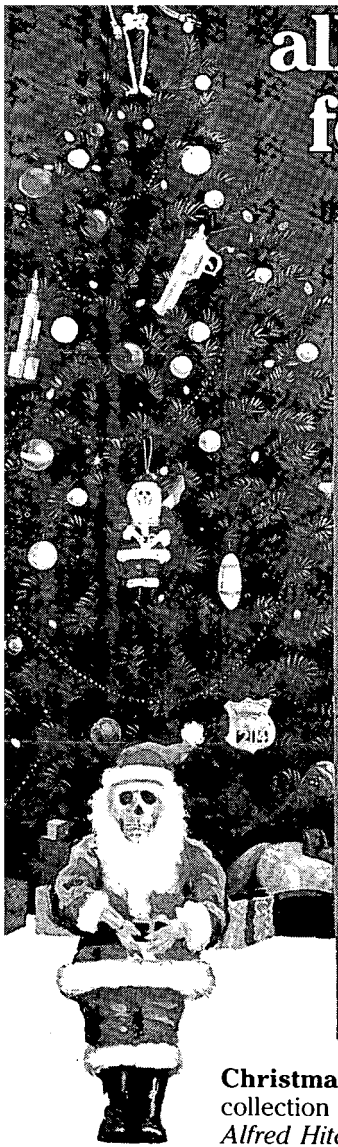

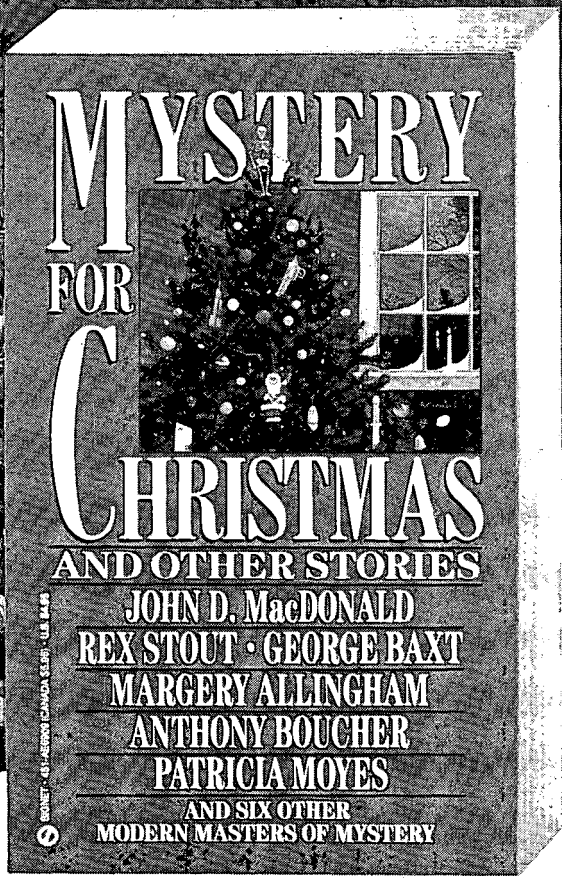

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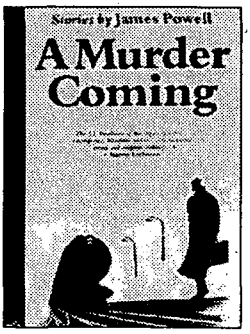

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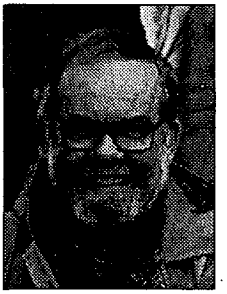

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a *NEW* Mrs. Craggs story by

H. R. F. KEATING

"It was a real country Christmas all right, up at the Manor," Mrs. Craggs told Mrs. Milhorne. "Old Mr. Ebenezer, 'e really liked that sort o' thing. The ole Charles Dickens bit. 'Olly, carols, plum pudding, Santa Claus, Yule log, presents round the tree. Pity 'e 'ad to go an' get murdered right in the middle of it."

Although best known for his Inspector Ghote of the Bombay C.I.D., H. R. F. Keating has also endeared himself to readers with his Mrs. Craggs, reproachless char, now retired . . .

THE CASE OF SEVEN SANTAS

by H. R. F. KEATING

Mrs. Craggs, former cleaning lady, secure in her retirement to the remote village of Princefinger, lying somewhere between the Dartmoor cragginess of Princeton and the mild Buckinghamshire comforts of Princes Risborough, wondered silently why she had ever agreed to a visit from her co-worker of old, Mrs. Milhorne.

"Yaiss," Mrs. Milhorne was saying with elegant reflectiveness, "I do love the countryside. So peaceful and what you might call, 'armon—hhharmonious."

She looked round.

"Why," she went on, "I don't suppose as 'ow—as hhhow you'd find anywhere in all England peacefuller than your Princefinger. Though, mind, I like a touch of class meself. That little bit of, you know, excitement."

"Good thing you wasn't here last Christmas, then," Mrs. Craggs replied. "Daresay you'd of found it a mite too exciting."

"Oh, I don't think so. I'd of enjoyed a real country Christmas. All the jollity."

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"Yeh, well, it was a real country Christmas all right, up at the Manor. Old Mr. Ebenezer, 'e really liked that sort o' thing. The ole Charles Dickens bit. 'Olly, carols, plum pudding, Santa Claus, Yule log, presents round the tree. Pity 'e 'ad to go an' get murdered right in the middle of it."

Mrs. Milhorne choked.

"O' course," Mrs. Craggs resumed when her friend had been patted on the back and was able to manage another sip of tea, "asked for it, old Eb did. No getting past that. I mean, when you're a rich bachelor living all on your own 'cept for a valet oose 'alf daft any 'ow, to go bringing down fer Christmas seven different people as you've told are coming in fer somethin' under the will an' then to threaten to cut some of 'em out of it—signin' your death stiffticate, that is."

"So it was one of them as done—as was doing it?" Mrs. Milhorne breathed, pale eyes glowing.

"Well, there they was, each one of 'em due fer a cool 'undred thousand, an' there was 'e sayin' some of 'em might not 'ave the right Christmas spirit."

"So one of them—one of those seven did— No, I'm wrong. There was eight. There was that valet."

"You're counting 'im in, then? That's more than what the police did. Soon as they 'eard old Tiny Tom—that's what I called 'im on account of 'im being so tall—as soon as they 'eard 'e was provided for with a nice little annuity started years before, they ruled 'im right out."

"So it was just the seven, then? Just the seven?"

It was Mrs. Craggs who discovered the body. When she came plodding into the big stone-flagged kitchen at the Manor on Christmas morning, stamping off her boots the snow that had fallen overnight, she was greeted by old Mr. Ebenezer's ancient valet, Tiny Tom, in even more of a dither than usual.

"Oh, Mrs. Craggs, Mrs. Craggs," he moaned in his dungeon-deep voice the moment he saw her, "I can't find him. I can't find him. Not in his bed when I took him his morning tea. Not in his bathroom. Not in his bed when I went back to look again. It hadn't been slept in, Mrs. Craggs! That's what I can't understand. It hadn't even been slept in!"

"Then perhaps 'e never got into it," Mrs. Craggs replied with a sharp sniff.

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"Never went to bed? You mean he—he never went to bed?"

"Yes, you daft lummox. Fell asleep in 'is chair down in what 'e calls the 'all, most likely. Decked with boughs o' 'olly indeed."

"He could have, Mrs. Craggs. He could have. They passed the steaming bowl of punch about enough last night—the smoking bishop, as Mr. Ebenezer said in his very own words."

"I'll give 'im bishop," Mrs. Craggs replied, setting off, tramp, tramp, tramp, towards the manor's lofty hall, with Tiny Tom trailing along behind her like an outsize question mark.

But bishop Mrs. Craggs was unable to give old Mr. Ebenezer. He was in his chair, all right, but there was a neat little bullet hole in the middle of his forehead.

There was more to the scene of the crime, too. Mr. Ebenezer's corpse was buried up to the chest in Christmas crackers. Bright red and vibrant green, with here and there a little glued-on picture of a robin or a reindeer, they were piled up by the hundred round his tall carved armchair. And, more, stuck on the knob at the chair's top there was a sheet of paper. It bore in neat printed letters the simple words OLD SCRATCH HAS GOT HIS OWN AT LAST.

"Well, don't just stand there with your mouth 'anging open like a bloomin' codfish," Mrs. Craggs said to Tiny Tom. "Phone for the police. There's been murder done, you know."

But of course in the end it was Mrs. Craggs who got herself put straight onto Inspector Hummbugg. She woke him from his bed, at the end of which dangled the stocking his faithful spouse, Martha Hummbugg nee Wilkins, had filled the night before with fifty-two tins of his favorite tobacco, one for each week of the year.

"Yes," Mrs. Craggs pounded into his scarcely woken ear. "Murdered. That's what I said. Murdered. An' plenty o' clues fer you, too. So you'd better get 'ere just as fast as you can. An' bring yer fingerprint set—I think you're going to need it. Princefinger Manor. Princefinger Manor. Now, 'ave you got that or 'aven't you?"

"I shall arrive in due course," said Inspector Hummbugg, and the sigh he gave as he contemplated the crammed stocking at the foot of the marital bed floated like a gale down the telephone line.

But eventually Mrs. Craggs showed his bulky form, and that of the pale young sergeant who came with him, into the hall where Mr. Ebenezer in his tall chair, a bullet hole in his head, sat surrounded by the high-piled Christmas crackers beneath the sheet of paper bearing the words OLD SCRATCH HAS GOT HIS OWN AT LAST.

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It was this that seemed to puzzle Inspector Hummbugg most.

"Old Scratch?" he said. "Now who on earth can Old Scratch be? Find out that, and, mark my words, Sergeant, we'll have our murderer under our thumb."

For a long moment he contemplated that thumb, a formidable piece of pig-pink flesh.

"Scrooge, sir," said the pale sergeant.

Inspector Hummbugg's little porcine eyes darted him a look of quick suspicion.

"It's Dickens, sir," the sergeant said, with haste. "His story, *A Christmas Carol*. Sir, it's about a man called Scrooge, and—"

"I'll thank you not to teach your grandfather to suck eggs, Sergeant. I know who Scrooge is, if you please."

"Yes, sir. But—" He was a courageous young man, this pallid sergeant. "Sir, in that story by Charles— In it, sir, when the Spirit of Times Yet To Come is showing old Scrooge the future, they hear a City merchant saying just those words, sir."

"Just what words, Sergeant? What are you blathering on about now?"

But that pale sergeant was a very courageous young man.

"Just 'Old Scratch has got his own at last,' sir. They're in the book, *A Christmas Carol*. Look, there's a copy in that bookcase over there. I'll show you."

He advanced towards a tailor-made bookcase containing each and every one of the works of Charles Dickens, old Mr. Ebenezer's favorite author, as he had been of his parents before him. Hence Mr. Ebenezer's addiction to old Christmas and all its traditions, right down to steaming bowls of bishop.

"Stop," said Mrs. Craggs.

"Stop?"

"Don't you touch that book, sonny."

Inspector Hummbugg bristled. He might treat his sergeant as if he were a schoolboy, but he did not at all care for anyone else doing so. "I'll thank you," he said to Mrs. Craggs, "not to come between me and a piece of vital evidence."

"Vital it may be," Mrs. Craggs retorted, "but it won't be 'alf so vital if that sergeant o' yours puts 'is fingerprints all over the ones what's probably there already. Can't you see that *Christmas Carol* book's the one what's sticking a bit out from the row? Like as not, the person what wrote that silly note on the chair went to that book

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to find the words for it. So you'd better get out your fingerprint set. If you remembered to bring it."

"Sergeant," said Inspector Hummbugg. "Prints apparatus. In the car. Get it, lad. Get it."

But just as the sergeant returned, Mrs. Craggs addressed Inspector Hummbugg once more. "O' course," she said, "them fingerprints won't lead you to the one what done it—not necessarily. I mean, what about the clue o' the thousand crackers?"

"The thousand—"

Hummbugg, and his sergeant, turned to look at the great heap of crackers almost burying Mr. Ebenezer's dead body.

"One thousand," said the Inspector. "How do you know there's a thousand there?"

"I don't, though I daresay I'm not far out. But what I do know is that only yesterday afternoon one o' the seven folk old Ebenezer invited 'ere, an' threatened to cut out o' his will, said to 'im, 'I 'ope I see you buried under your damn Christmas crackers.' "

"Sergeant," said Inspector Hummbugg. "Notebook."

Mrs. Craggs waited till the sergeant's pencil was poised.

"Young woman by the name o' Yettercumb," she said.

The sergeant coughed. "Would you be so kind as to spell that?"

"For heaven's sake, man," Hummbugg exploded, "didn't they even teach you spelling at school?"

"Yeh," said Mrs. Craggs, "I'd better spell it. Funny old name."

Letter by letter, she spelt it out.

"That is funny, all right," the sergeant commented.

"I'll give you funny," Hummbugg snapped. "Just put down what you're told and keep your mouth shut."

"An' you know why it's funny, that name," Mrs. Craggs went on, just as if Hummbugg's huge pink bulk was not there at all.

"Will you kindly get on with it, woman?" Hummbugg boomed.

"I am. If you'd listen. That name, Yettercumb, remind you of anything, sonny? You've read that old *Christmas Carol* story, didn't yer say? Just like I was brought up on it."

Slowly, light dawned on the sergeant's pale face.

"Yettercumb," he said. "Yet to come. The Spirit of Times Yet To Come."

"You got it. That's why old Ebenezer 'ere even knew 'er, the silly young chit. Collected 'em up, 'e did. Names in that story. We ain't only got young Fifi Yettercumb. We got Mr. Parst, what speculates in what they calls Stock Exchange futures, whatever they may be,

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an' we got Mr. Pressent, what's a theatrical angel, which I takes ter be a real-life devil. Times Parst an' Times Pressent. An' more. We got Marylee Jacob, actress an' no better nor what she ought ter be."

"Marylee Jacob?" The sergeant's pallid face wore a frown. And then cleared. "Jacob Marley!" he exclaimed. "Old Scrooge's dead partner, Jacob Marley, just turned around!"

"All right, then," Mrs. Craggs went on, "'ow about Mrs. Feswick, failed authoress so I 'eard 'er called?"

"Easy. Wife of jolly old Mr. Fezziwig, Scrooge's employer when he was an apprentice."

"You're doin' all right, son. So let me tell you that old Mr. Ebenezer acksherly 'appened to 'ave a nephew name o' Fred. Ready made, as you might say."

"Yes, yes. Scrooge's nephew was called Fred. At least I think he was. Any others?"

"Just the one. Try the Honorable Robert Crayshett-Clark."

The frown on the sergeant's face deepened and deepened.

Then with a snort that would have done credit to a prize porker Inspector Hummbugg broke in.

"Bob," he said. "Bob Cratchit. I remember seeing it all on the stage when I was a kid. Bob Cratchit, clerk. But where's his son, Tiny Tim, then? He was the one I really liked. 'God bless us every one.' " Hastily he wiped away a pair of tears that had oozed one from each of his piggy little eyes.

"What about Tiny Tim?"

"You'll 'ave to make do with Tiny Tom, the valet," Mrs. Craggs replied. "Only other living soul in the 'ouse last night when that snow was a-fallin'. He's a regular muttonhead, but that's the best we got."

But a ferocious gleam had suddenly come into Inspector Hummbugg's little eyes.

"Sergeant," he said, "get that fellow in here. Always suspect the butler. First rule of investigation. And I reckon a valet's as good as a butler any day."

"O' course," Mrs. Craggs told Mrs. Milhorne, "when that Hummbugg 'eard as 'ow Tiny Tom, God bless us every one, 'ad 'ad that annuity of 'is fer years already, 'e put 'im out of account straightaway."

"Yaiss," said Mrs. Milhorne. "Yaiss, 'e—hhhe'd hhhave to, wouldn't 'e?"

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"Not but what old Tom didn't do 'im a bit o' good."

"I saw him, though, I saw him," Tiny Tom said as Inspector Hummbugg waved him exasperatedly away.

"Saw who, man? For heaven's sake, speak up if you've got anything to say."

"Saw the one what done it, Inspector."

"Saw him? Saw him? Then why the heck didn't you say so?"

"Couldn't, Inspector."

"I'll give you couldn't. It's an offense, you know, withholding evidence. Now, *who* did you see?"

"Santa Claus, Inspector."

"Santa—"

But Mrs. Craggs stepped in and deflected the mighty porcine wrath.

"I get it," she said. "It's this. The whole bloomin' lot of 'em came down 'ere with Santa outfits—saw 'em meself, doin' out the rooms. Wantin' ter please the old devil, I suppose. An' what Tiny Tom 'ere's sayin' is the one what crep' down an' shot 'im wore that outfit to do it."

"Then we'll have each manjack of them in and—"

"Oh, no, Inspector," Mrs. Craggs interrupted again. "It ain't manjack. It's womanjack as well. Behind one o' them big white beards it could 'ave been a woman just as well as a man. An' I tell you somethin' else. They're all of a height, each an' every one of 'em. Noticed it yesterday. So there'd be no tellin' one from another, dressed up like that."

"Bother," said Inspector Hummbugg.

But his pendulous pig-cheeks did not stay droopily despondent for long.

"Ha," he exclaimed scarcely five minutes after the door had eventually closed behind Tiny Tom. "Something was said about a threat. I haven't forgotten. Someone in this house threatened to bury the late Mr. Ebenezer under one thousand of his Christmas crackers, and I want to know who."

"Yettercumb," Mrs. Craggs answered. "I was tellin' yer."

"Sergeant. Why isn't Miss Yettercumb here? You're never going to solve cases, my lad, if you don't follow up a clue pretty sharpish. I'll tell you that for nothin'."

"No, sir. Yes, sir."

And in no time at all, little blonde Fifi Yettercumb was confront-

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ing the Inspector in Mr. Ebenezer's next-door study. On the broad desk the ancient typewriter had been thrust aside in favor of a generous sample of the Christmas crackers, together with the sheet of paper from the top of the chair. Once again the sergeant's pencil was poised.

Inspector Hummbugg pounced.

"So," he said, glaring ferociously at the black-leather-clad curvaceous little creature in front of him, "you buried Mr. Ebenezer's body under a pile of his Christmas crackers after all, did you? Afraid he'd cut you out of your hundred thousand pounds as soon as Christmas was over, eh?"

"No, Inspector, no. No, I never!"

"No use denying it, my girl. Saying 'No, I never' won't get you out of trouble. Not here, and not in court."

"But it's the truth, most like."

It was Mrs. Craggs, stepping out from the dark shadows of the oak-paneled room where she had been careful to hide to get a ringside view.

"What do you mean it's the truth?" Inspector Hummbugg thundered.

"Look," said Mrs. Craggs, "if you was goin' to murder a bloke what was going to cut you out of 'is will, would you go an' do to 'is corp just what everyone 'ad 'eard you threaten to do? I didn't think it was very likely all along, an' when I 'eard the young lady deny it I was sure."

"But— But— But why were those crackers there if she didn't put them there as per her threat?"

"Simple," said Mrs. Craggs. "It was because the real murderer wanted to put the blame on 'er. Make 'is or 'er share o' the dibbins all the bigger, wouldn't it, if this young lady was found guilty?"

"Yes," Fifi Yettercumb put in with palpitating haste. "It musta been one of the others, trying to put the blame on a girl! I mean, have you thought about that mysterious typewritten note there, Inspector? That's words out of that *Christmas Carol* thing, ain't it? And joo know somethink?"

Inspector Hummbugg blew down his nose till the crackers on the desk began to tumble to the ground below. "I daresay I know more than you think, my girl," he said.

"Well, then, what joo know?"

For a moment, for a good many moments, Inspector Hummbugg did not speak. Then at last he looked at Fifi again.

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"Suppose you tell me," he said.

"Well, last night when we were all sitting round that Yule log thingy, and the nails in it going off every few seconds like ever so many pistol shots, old Eb asked us if we'd all read that *Christmas Carol* book. And only one of us said right out they had. I mean, who could get through all that?"

"Right, then," said Hummbugg. "Who was this person?"

"That Mrs. Feswick," Fifi replied promptly. "Her and her sarky remarks."

So it was just a few minutes later that Inspector Hummbugg had in front of him at the late Mr. Ebenezer's desk Mrs. Bonny Feswick, fiftyish, bouncy, tweeds-clad.

"Jolly good, Inspector," she said. "Thought you'd want to see me. Interviewing all round, what? Well, here I am. Always ready to do my duty. Spread a little happiness, don't you know."

Hummbugg's huge pink face assumed an expression of immense cunning. "Glad to hear that, madam," he said. "And I think you can indeed help us. We're interested in this note found on the chair above Mr. Ebenezer's body."

Mrs. Feswick looked at the sheet. "It's a quotation from *A Christmas Carol*," she said rather slowly. "What someone says about Scrooge after he's dead. In the future, you know. Bit awful, what?"

"Mrs. Feswick," Hummbugg said with a sudden ferocious glance, "what would you answer if I told you that of all the people in this house you are the only one to know that story through and through?"

"I—I—"

"And what would you say if I added that I strongly suspect this note was typed on this very machine in here?"

Mrs. Feswick gave a huge smile. "I'd tell you to look at the note a little more closely, Inspector," she replied. "I think you'll find that it wasn't produced on a typewriter at all. I think you'll find it was produced on a word-processor."

At this, the sergeant peered forward and examined the sheet that hitherto Inspector Hummbugg had kept as his personal possession.

"Yes, sir," he said. He was a very, very young sergeant. "That's quite right, sir. You can easily tell that sort of word-processor print. Dot matrix."

"Dot? Dot? I'll dot you one in a moment, my lad."

But the Inspector did turn to Mrs. Feswick. "Thank you, madam," he said. "That will be all."

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"Oh," said Mrs. Feswick. "But aren't you going to ask me if I know whether anybody in this house has a word-processor?"

"I was about to put that question to you when you elected to depart."

"Well, then, let me tell you in confidence, Inspector, that Miss Marylee Jacob has a word-processor in her room, wrapped up in sheets of paper with snowmen on them. She intends to give it for Christmas to Bob Crayshett-Clark, the sweet boy. As if that would do any good."

And out she flounced.

"I think," said Hummbugg, "it'd be no bad thing to have a word with Miss Jacob, Marylee."

It was Mrs. Craggs who was dispatched to find this new witness, not to say suspect.

And once again Hummbugg, that man of cunning incarnate, adopted shock tactics.

"Tried out your nice little present for Mr. Crayshett-Clark, did you?" he asked without preliminary.

But Marylee Jacob, brassy as a brass door-knocker, showed not the least sign of guilt or dismay at the shot-out question.

"Oh, no, Inspector," she said. "I mean, I wouldn't know how to work something like that. No, all I did was to creep into Bob's room late last night, all dressed up as Santa Claus if you can imagine, and leave my little present for him to find this morning. It did look as if the paper round it had been disturbed, though. Perhaps that was what made you think I'd tried it out."

She gave the Inspector a sweet, sweet smile. If hammered brass can smile sweetly.

"Nevertheless," he said, ignoring the smile, "a certain note found not a foot away from the corpse was written on a word-processor. You can tell by the print, you know. What we call dot mattress."

"Well, Inspector," Marylee answered, "all I can suggest is that somebody very naughty tapped out that note on the word-processor before I gave it to sweety-pie Bob."

"And why would they do that?"

"Oh, Inspector, haven't you worked that out yet? If whoever murdered that awful old man can pin it on someone else it means all the bigger share of what he's left, doesn't it?"

"I am quite capable of working out whatever I have to work out for myself, madam," Hummbugg answered, giving no credit at all

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to Mrs. Craggs, who had pointed this out to him in the first place. "But that leaves the question of who, in fact, did murder Mr. Ebenezer."

"And haven't you worked that out, either, Inspector? I mean, you've surely only got to find the weapon, and there'll be some nice, nice fingerprints on it for you. It'll be easy as falling off a Yule log, and I'm sure you can manage that."

Exit Miss Marylee Jacob.

"Sergeant," roared Hummbugg, "find the weapon!"

It took the sergeant, who despite his youth and innocence was a very active young man, just seven and a half minutes to find the gun that had put that bullet so neatly into Mr. Ebenezer's forehead. It was down at the back of the tub in which stood Mr. Ebenezer's enormous Christmas tree. Carefully taking it out, the sergeant blew powder onto it from his insufflator and revealed even to the naked eye splendidly clear fingerprints. Expertly he photographed them, and then, zooming off like a demented ice-skater, he secured in no time the prints of each of the seven suspects.

And it was clear beyond doubt that the ones on the gun belonged to none other than Mr. Ebenezer's nephew Fred.

"I shall make the arrest at the very spot where the deed took place," Inspector Hummbugg announced, leading the way, swaying and swinging, back into the holly-decorated hall.

Nephew Fred was brought before him, sleepy-eyed and yawning.

"Don't know how it is," he said easily, "but I just dropped off. Always doing it, you know, having a bit of a zizz. And it's not as if I don't go off at night. I do. From ten o'clock on, I'm out to the wide. Always have been. Daresay I always will be."

Solemnly, Inspector Hummbugg interrupted these self-revelations.

"Mr. Frederick Ebenezer," he began. But before he could pronounce another word, Mrs. Craggs, who had been taking a good look at the gun with those clear, clear prints on it, called out.

"'Ere, wait a sec!"

Deflated as if by a suddenly injected pin, Inspector Hummbugg wheeled round. "What—"

"You 'ave another dekko at these 'ere finger marks," Mrs. Craggs said. "I've taken 'old of enough brush 'andles in me time to know where your fingers come on 'em, an' I tell yer this: nobody never 'eld this 'ere gun in a way they could of shot anybody with it, not never."

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Inspector Hummbugg peered. Nephew Fred peered. The pale sergeant peered.

It was this last who had the temerity to speak.

"She's quite right, sir, now you come to look."

"Yes, yes," said Nephew Fred. "I promise you I never touched that gun. But I'll tell you what did happen to me. I was fast asleep last night, dreaming of something, forget what, and then—this has hardly ever happened to me before—I woke up. I woke up and had the distinct impression somebody had been holding my hand."

He gave a violent blush.

"Thought it might have been Bonny Feswick," he said. "Afraid she's rather keen on me. Or it might have been Marylee. Afraid she's a bit keen on me, too."

"What you're telling me," Inspector Hummbugg said, "is that somebody came into your room last night while you were sound asleep and put your fingerprints on the weapon here."

"Yes. Yes, old boy, that's what I was telling you. Got it in one." He gave a tremendous yawn. "Well," he said, "I suppose as those fingerprints have been sort of disposed of I may as well take the gun. Belongs to me now, you know. Uncle Ebenezer always said I'd get the house and everything in it. Only trouble was he was never too sure about leaving me enough actual cash to keep the old place going. Said I was too lazy. Can't think why."

With another prodigious yawn, he picked up the gun and wandered out.

"But then," said Mrs. Craggs, "a funny thing 'appened."

"No. What?" said Mrs. Milhorne, eyes popping.

"Sleepy-clogs came back in again in just a brace o' shakes an' asked old Hummbugg did 'e know somethin' about that gun."

Inspector Hummbugg knew nothing about the gun. To judge from his massive silence.

So his sergeant evidently felt it up to him to save the honor of the county police.

"We know you were making off with the weapon in a somewhat suspicious manner, Mr. Frederick Ebenezer," he said, drawing himself up to his full formal height.

"Oh, no, old boy. It's just this. You see, there aren't any more bullets in it, and Uncle always kept it fully loaded. Happen to know that."

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"And so?" the redoubtable Hummbugg came trundling in.

"Well, and so, Inspector, find the bullets taken out of the gun and I'd say you'd found your murderer." Fred yawned again.

"Sergeant, search the house."

It took the sergeant, who in spite of his pallor was a robustly active youth, only two and a half hours to search the house. But at last he came back to the study with in his hand five fat revolver bullets.

"Well," Hummbugg grunted, "where'd you find 'em? Took you long enough."

"In the bedroom assigned to the Honorable Robert Crayshett-Clark," the sergeant replied. "Hidden."

"Then why haven't you brought Bob Cratchit back down with you, lad? He'll have made his escape by now."

"He's just outside, sir."

"Then why isn't he standing here in front of me? Jump to it, lad, jump to it!"

The sergeant jumped. Bob Crayshett-Clark, man-about-town, debonair, not quite wearing an eyeglass, was standing in front of Inspector Hummbugg.

"God bless us every one," Hummbugg said, sadly shaking his great pink head. "I'm disappointed in you, Crayshett, father of a boy as good in every way as Tiny—"

"Father?" Bob Crayshett-Clark exclaimed. "I assure you, Inspector, I have never even contemplated matrimony, much less— Well, much less."

"That is as may be, sir," said Hummbugg, loudly blowing his snout to remove the two tears that had crept from his eyes at the thought, however mistaken, of Tiny Tim. "But there's still the matter of certain bullets concealed in your room."

Bob Crayshett-Clark flicked a minute scrap of lint from his beautifully tailored suit. "Come, Inspector," he said, "I'm not such an idiot as to hide bullets from a gun I'd just shot someone with in my own room."

"That's what I calls common sense," Mrs. Craggs put in from the shadows.

"Well, then," Hummbugg began.

But the Honorable Bob at once answered the question the Inspector would eventually have got round to asking.

"Last night," he said, "a person dressed as Santa Claus entered

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my room thinking I was asleep. I cannot name a name, but I feel it my duty to mention that that fellow Parst, hardly one's idea of a gentleman, has been going about all morning searching for his spectacles. Should you by chance have seen a pair at the scene of the crime, I think I can leave you to draw your own conclusions."

He withdrew.

Mrs. Craggs, still watching from the shadows, drew her conclusions. The pale sergeant drew his conclusions. They waited. At length Inspector Hummbugg arrived at his conclusions.

"Sergeant," he said thoughtfully, "have you observed anything in the hall in the nature of a pair of spectacles?"

"Yes, sir. I've just been looking. There's a pair caught up in the Christmas tree. And, sir, I have asked Mr. Parst to step in."

Mr. Parst, blinking so distractedly that his future as a speculator in futures seemed particularly in doubt, forestalled the question working its way up Inspector Hummbugg's capacious gullet.

"You're a policeman," he said. "Ought to be good at finding things. You noticed my glasses anywhere? Can't see a damn thing without them."

"Yes, sir," Hummbugg said portentously. "A pair of spectacles has been found caught in the Christmas tree not five yards from the body of the late lamented Mr. Ebenezer."

"Ah, good. Well done. Credit to the force. Let me have them, will you?"

"It will be my duty," Hummbugg pronounced yet more portentously, "to retain them as evidence in any criminal trial that may or may not take place."

"Ah," said Mr. Parst, "so you've got someone in your sights, eh? Good work. Spotted something clenched in the corpse's fist, I daresay. Fine piece of detection."

Another question was perhaps moving slowly up Inspector Hummbugg's gullet. But before it had reached the air, Mr. Parst had gone.

The sergeant coughed. A pale cough, but enough to draw attention.

"Shall I take a close look at the corpse, sir?" he asked. "At his fists or something?"

"No, lad, you will not. If a close search is in order, it'd better be done by an expert."

The three of them returned to Mr. Ebenezer's body, still half buried in bright Christmas crackers. Ponderously, Inspector Hummbugg

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peered at both the fists, which were every bit as clenched as Mr. Parst had indicated.

"Nothing," he said at last. "Trying his tricks, mark my words. Sergeant, have you ever seen a man arrested for murder? Well, if you haven't, you're just about to see that happening to a certain Mr. Parst."

"Only one moment," said Mrs. Craggs. "If you'd spent as much o' your life a-looking fer little bits o' dirt as what I 'ave, you'd of seen what's just peeking out between them third an' fourth fingers there." She pointed.

Inspector Hummbugg returned to the corpse. His sergeant peered over his massive shoulder.

"Why, yes, sir," he said. "A tiny bit of green material. And, sir, when I was taking fingerprints I saw that Mr. Pressent—he's the one who's a theatrical angel, sir, backs shows and that—though dressed in a green country suit, with green socks and even a green handkerchief in the pocket, was wearing a pink bow-tie."

"An' when 'e arrived 'ere," added Mrs. Craggs, " 'e was wearin' a green 'un. You can draw a conclusion from that, if you like."

"Sergeant," said Inspector Hummbugg, "didn't I tell you five minutes ago to bring Mr. Pressent down here?"

"No, sir, you— Yes, sir. Yes, Inspector, you did." The sergeant was learning, perhaps.

Soon Mr. Pressent, green as the holly decorating the hall, was brought in.

"Charles Pressent," Hummbugg began without preliminary, "I am arresting—"

" 'Ere," said Mrs. Craggs, "shouldn't you be askin' 'im, afore you go sayin' who you was a-goin' to arrest, why 'e put all them crackers round the corpse?"

"And why," said Hummbugg, before he had time to think, "did you put all them—that is, all those crackers round the corpse?"

Green-clad Mr. Pressent went green to the gills.

"Ask 'im if it weren't to make it look like Fifi Yettercumb done the murder," said Mrs. Craggs.

"Was it to make it look as if Fifi Yett— Was it to create the appearance of Miss Yettercumb—er—doing the murder?"

Mr. Pressent turned from green to blushful red.

"Look, Inspector," he said, "I happened to be coming down here

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last night to—to see if Ebenezer, whom we had left half asleep in his chair, was all right, and—"

"Or p'haps," said Mrs. Craggs, "you was creepin' down dressed up as a Santa to see if it was a good time to put the poor old devil out of 'is Christmas misery."

"Inspector, never mind why I was coming down. The fact of the matter is I found Ebenezer dead, and I thought that the police might—well, might suspect me myself."

"Which," said Mrs. Craggs, "seein' as 'ow it was probably your intention to murder the poor old feller anyhow, was pretty much on the cards."

"Be that as it may, Inspector. The thing is I—er—thought it better your attention should be directed elsewhere, and recalling that awful little Fifi's threat earlier in the evening I decided to put all Ebenezer's crackers where she had said she would like to see them. Why, it is quite probable she did in fact kill him."

At which the door burst open and that awful little Fifi flung herself in. "You rotten swine," she said, "what for joo pick on me? I may've thought old Eb was a bloody bore, yakking on about Christmas and that, but I wouldn't ever have murdered him, not however much I could do with a hundred thousand quid!"

"Well, I don't know what to say," Inspector Hummbugg murmured.

"But I do," said Mrs. Craggs. "I got this to say to you, Miss Fifi. If you think it's so bad o' Mr. Pressent 'ere to try to plant the job on you, why did you go an' write that note on old Ebenezer's typewriter an' put it on the chair to make it look as if it was Mrs. Feswick what done it?"

Now it was the turn of Fifi Yettercumb to look ashamed, though she hardly managed as deep a blush as Mr. Pressent.

"Oh," she said, "might as well own up. What I did was look through and through that book till I found some good words, and then I picked them out on old Eb's typewriter. I thought that'd teach that snobby bitch to say I didn't even know how to read."

"But, wait a moment," the sergeant broke in, his pale face alight with intellectual triumph. "That note wasn't typed. It was written on a word-processor. Dot matrix."

"O' course it was," Mrs. Craggs said. "An' who do you think by? That Mrs. Feswick, o' course."

At once the door opened, and Bonny Feswick stood there.

"Well," she said, "when I came down to the hall here, dressed up

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as Santa Claus I don't mind admitting, and found someone had already done the deed and tried to make it look as if it was me, I wasn't going to take it lying down."

"Do you mean to say, madam," the young sergeant jumped in with youthful outrage, "that you went up to Miss Marylee Jacob's room and used her word-processor?"

"Look," Bonny Feswick replied cheerfully, "I wasn't going to let her cut me out with that dishy young man if I could help it, was I?"

And then to the surprise of everyone—except perhaps Mrs. Craggs—the door burst open again and Marylee Jacob came storming in. "You bitch," she said to Bonny Feswick. "Why, if—"

She got no further.

Mrs. Craggs had a word to say.

"Just a minute. Suppose you tells us who it was what crep' into young Fred's room, knowing the way he slep' an' slep', an' put 'is fingers round the gun. After you 'ad come down 'ere, all in your Santas, too, I daresay, an' found old Ebenezer dead with a clue pointing to you?"

Marylee was made of too much brass ever to blush. But she did look a little put out. "All right," she said. "But I didn't like the way Fred kept hinting I had a thing about him. As if I would. When he'd fall asleep before I'd even—"

"Sergeant," said Inspector Hummbugg, going a pinker shade of pink, "suppose you go and fetch Mr. Frederick? I daresay you'll find him dozing off somewhere. Ho ho ho."

"In an armchair next door, sir," the sergeant said half a minute later, leading in a yawning, stretching Fred.

And this time Hummbugg turned directly to Mrs. Craggs.

"Well?"

"Now let's 'ave the truth," Mrs. Craggs said to Fred. "When the Inspector 'ere accused you o' the murder just now you thought you'd better be on the safe side an' make it look like someone else done it, didn't yer? So you went off an' put them bullets in Bob Crayshett-Clark's room. That gun was never as empty as what you made out, was it?"

"Got it in one," Fred said, with a rueful shake of his head. "Not very decent to try and pin it on old Bob. But I couldn't think of anything else."

And the door burst open once again.

It was the Honorable Robert Crayshett-Clark.

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"Well, damn it all," he said, "I do think you might have hit on somebody else. I mean, a fellow doesn't like to be accused of murder, even if he hasn't done it."

"Then why," said Mrs. Craggs, stepping smartly forward, "did you go an' pinch poor old Mr. Parst's spectacles from 'is room an' leave them a-danglin' on that there tree?"

"How do you know that?"

"Well, stand to reason Mr. Parst couldn't never 'ave shot old Ebenezer, not without 'is glasses, 'im being blind as a bat when 'e ain't got 'em on. So someone must 'ave tried to plant the job on 'im. An' you was as likely as any, seeing there ain't 'ardly no one else left."

The Honorable Bob looked round the room.

"There's Mr. Pressent," he said. "He is, ha ha, present."

Now Inspector Hummbugg, almost all the suspects eliminated, moved into resolute action. "So, Mr. Pressent," he said, "suppose you account for the dead man having in his clenched fist a tiny piece of green material, which I happened have to observed. Taking into account you are no longer wearing your green bow-tie."

Mr. Pressent went pink as the tie beneath his chin.

But Mrs. Craggs came at once to his rescue.

"That green tie, which I 'appened to point out to yer, Inspector, bein' clutched in the dead man's 'and, can't mean our friend 'ere murdered 'im. Old Ebenezer was shot, you know, 'e couldn't 'ardly 'ave wrenched off the tie o' the man what shot 'im, could 'e?"

"No," said the young sergeant, careless at last of all promotion. "Of course he couldn't have. So how did that tie get there?"

Mrs. Craggs went over to the door and jerked it open. Mr. Parst, speculator, was standing there, ear pressed to a panel, attempting to see the future without having to speculate.

"Well?" said Mrs. Craggs.

"Oh, well, dash it. Might as well admit it. When I found my specs had been taken from my bedside table, I wondered if they'd been made away with for a purpose. So I came down here, and could just make out that poor old Ebenezer was dead. Not moving, you see. So I groped my way up to the first room I came to—I suppose it was Pressent's—grabbed an article of clothing, and managed to stuff it into the body's fist. Did I get it all in?"

"You did, you swine," remarked Mr. Pressent.

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And now from somewhere inside Inspector Hummbugg there came a curious, querulous rumbling.

"Well," he said at last, "if none of them murdered Mr. Ebenezer, who for heaven's sake did?"

"Why," said Mrs. Craggs, "simple enough. Tiny Tom's the one. 'Im an' 'is talk o' seeing a Santa creepin' in. Nothin' to 'ave stopped 'im being the killer 'imself. An' as to motive, provided for 'e may 'ave been but 'ow well was 'e provided for? Not with a hundred thousand quid, you can bet yer boots on that. So when 'e 'ears all this lot was gettin' that much each, what should 'e do but shoot the mean old Scrooge what gavè 'im such a pittance."

"And hhhad he done it, that Tom?" Mrs. Milhorne asked, blinking.

"I told yer, didn't I?"

"Yaiss. Yaiss, but what I can't understand is I never saw nothing about hhhim in the paper. On trial and that."

"Nah. Well, you wouldn't 'ave done, would yer? Not with old Hummbugg needing almost till New Year's Eve to catch on. Tiny Tom just 'opped on the nearest reindeer, I reckon, 'an skedaddled. 'Cos 'e ain't never been seen since."

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Bobby was staying at a hotel and Dora was glad. He was only sticking around to collect what Mum left him in her will and then would be going back to Arizona. Dora hoped he could do it in the next couple of days because she really didn't think she could stand the sight of him much longer.

Canadian Madeline Sonik is a freelance journalist and the mother of two young daughters. "I've always enjoyed writing fiction," she told us, "and last January, realizing my thirtieth birthday was approaching, I determined the time had come to conquer my fears of rejection and begin seriously trying to market my fiction. My husband, who has always supported my 'congenital embellishing,' suggested a competition: we would both write mystery stories and submit them to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. *He never started his story, but 'Abiding Peace' was what I produced. Whether he ever actually intended to write a story will always be a mystery to me."*

If it was *a ruse, all we can say is that we're in the clever man's debt . . .*

ABIDING PEACE

by MADELINE SONIK

March 15, 1990
Dear Mum,

It's the night after your funeral, and I think if I can write to you it might help me deal with my pain.

I wrote a short note the night you died. It made me feel a little easier. I'm so hurt, remembering, Mum, and I can't think of any other way to get my head clear again. I considered going to a psychiatrist after it happened, but I know how you'd feel about that.

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I don't think you'd mind me writing a letter to you every now and again though, would you?

I've realized for the first time in my life how much I depended on your being here for me. When I was trying to make the arrangements, I couldn't decide on the casket. It's crazy, but my first response was to want to ask you—and then I remembered you were dead and I could never ask you anything again. I miss you, Mum, and wish you were still here to tell me what to do.

Bobby flew in from Arizona. You wouldn't have recognized him, he's so different. I know how much you loved Bobby, and I really hate to write anything unflattering about him, but I've got to say, Mum, I really detest him—more now than ever. I can't understand why he never came to see you when you were alive. God knows you'd written him enough, begging. He pulled into the driveway in a limo, and of course he was all decked out in an expensive business suit and kept checking this gold watch on his wrist. I could just hear the meter ticking in his head. And then he started criticizing me for everything I'd done. He said I'd spent too much money on your casket, that I'd chosen a bad funeral home, that I should have gotten an Anglican minister. I just fell apart.

He's staying at a hotel tonight and I'm glad. He's only sticking around to collect what you left him in your will, and then he's going back. I hope he can do it in the next couple of days because I really don't think I can stand the sight of him much longer.

I don't know what you saw in him, why you admired him so much. He's such scum and he never cared about you at all. There was no reason in the world why he couldn't have sent you plane fare to go see him. He's got pots of money. He's got a chain of ripoff nursing homes he never told you about. I could just scream when I think of how much sympathy he milked from you—poor, struggling Bobby, trying to make good—all those corny, stupid letters full of pretend problems. I know you sent him money, because I looked through your checkbooks. How could you be such a bad judge of character? I only hope, wherever you are, you know the truth about him now.

At least he was uncomfortable at your funeral. All your friends were there. Sweet Mrs. Beatty from across the street, Darlene Fletcher, Agnes Moore, Lillian White. All the ladies from your choir. Even Mr. Schultz from the grocery came, and they were all very nice to me, telling me I'd been a good daughter and that if I needed anything to let them know. None of them talked to Bobby. Maybe none of them knew who he was. I didn't introduce him, anyway. I

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just let him stand there by himself. He didn't come back home afterward for coffee and sandwiches. I have to admit that pleased me.

I've got so many beautiful sympathy cards, Mum. I've lined them up across the mantelpiece. I know you wouldn't have liked some of them. Most of the older ladies sent religious ones I shoved to the back, but some of the others are quite pretty and touching. I think I like Darlene's best. It's very simple—two purple long-stemmed flowers on the front, and the verse reads: "May time bring peace." Darlene wrote a little note inside: "Dear Dora, Your mother was a truly wonderful person. We shall all feel a tremendous loss. She always spoke so highly of you and loved you so dearly. You were a model daughter who brought her joy—your commitment and love were evident always."

Of course, I'll write to everyone who came, thanking them, and I'll keep all the cards.

Love,
Dora

March 16, 1990
Dear Mum,

That obnoxious son of yours was here today, flashing his garish gold watch around and pawing over your possessions. I caught him in your bedroom rummaging through your jewelry box. He had the audacity to ask me what I did with your opal brooch. I could have smashed him in the head. Needless to say, I didn't tell him it was pinned to my black sweater. I guess he thought he'd pawn it or something. He's such a jerk. I know he's really upset that you left the house to me. Even though I stayed with you when he went galavanting off, he thinks he's entitled to it, I suppose!

Last night I couldn't sleep, wondering why he was your favorite. I made hot milk, just the way you used to make it for me when I was little, with honey and butter, but I still couldn't get to sleep. I hate to be bitter, Mum, but it seems to me he always got the rewards and I always got the work. I always did what you told me and he *never* did, and still you liked him better than me. I wanted you to wake up and see him for what he really was, but you just told me not to be jealous.

I don't think he deserves the twenty thousand you left him. He's got plenty of money of his own, and you know the kind of paltry pay I get. I don't even know for sure how long I'll be able to afford to live in our house. Maybe in a year I'll sell it and move into an

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apartment—maybe even get a roommate. I guess I can tell you now that that was always one of my fantasies. But still, I'd rather have been able to do it on my own terms than be forced to do it because I don't have enough money to stay here.

I was also upset about your leaving him our electric typewriter and our Royal Doulton china. As soon as I found out, I packed it all up and hid it in my secret place in the attic. You mustn't have been thinking straight when you made that will! What could these things possibly mean to him? I did let him take the down comforter from your bed, though, and I hope he has many unpleasant nights under it. I also gave him all your bed linen because I've decided to sell your bed and make the room over into a kind of study. I wish you were here to tell me how to do it. I have such trouble making decisions and, as you know, I've never really had good taste, but Mrs. Beatty said she'd help me pick the wallpaper. She's such a dear lady. She baked me a dozen blueberry muffins and we chatted for about an hour today.

I'm supposed to go back to work tomorrow, but I feel like I need at least another week off. I know you'd think I was doing the wrong thing. You always believed if I missed one day of work my typing and shorthand skills would deteriorate, and I was always trying to assure you that being a secretary wasn't like being a concert pianist. Remember the time I had stomach flu and I went to work to humor you? I vomited in my wastepaper basket and they sent me home. I don't think I've ever been so humiliated, and you were so mad at me.

I never wanted to tell you when you were alive because I thought you'd think I was ungrateful, but I didn't want to be a secretary. You'd been a secretary and had your heart set on my being one, but I really wanted to be an interior decorator.

I guess I should be thankful I didn't pursue my dreams. In a way, I wish I'd told you before you died. I know we'd both have gotten a good laugh out of it.

Anyway, Mr. McCorbet's been really good about all this time I've been missing from work. He's a nice man. He came to your funeral. And, Mum, I'm glad you got me a job working for him. You were right, I couldn't have gotten one on my own. What was it you used to say about me? "Dowdy and lusterless"—so true. At least, if anything happened to my job now, I'd have ten years' experience to fall back on. But, still, I wish you were here to help me choose. I just

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can't get over how much I miss you. I never thought I'd feel this way.

About missing work, if you're going to get mad at anyone over it, get mad at Bobby. If it weren't for him breathing down my neck, I know I'd be able to return sooner. He tells me he's going to be here for a week so I can look for the brooch, the typewriter, and the china. I'll give him those over my dead body!

Love,
Dora

March 20, 1990
Dear Mum,

It seems such a long time since I've written to you, although it's only been four days. I've just been going out of my mind with Bobby around.

I told Mrs. Beatty all about him and how he's badgering me for what you left him. I also told her I couldn't find those things. She's such a nice lady. Did you know she knows the sheriff personally? She phoned him up, right here from our kitchen, and talked to him about Bobby. He said he'd take care of him and send him back to Arizona for me. You can't believe how relieved I am.

Anyway, I'm feeling much better, and the sheriff said that if I can't find those things Bobby wants, it's not the end of the world. You wouldn't believe what that son of yours was threatening to do. He said he was going to get the police and a search warrant so he could tip the entire house upside down. I have to laugh when I think about it. He'll never get a search warrant now.

Mrs. Beatty also has been helping in other ways. Yesterday she put a perm in my hair. I think you'd be pleased with the results. She said, "Dora, you're such a pretty thing, why don't you do something with your hair?" and the next day here she was with all these rollers and this home permanent kit. She didn't even ask me to pay her. She said sometime this week we ought to go shopping together and she'll help me pick out a new outfit. Even though she's twice my age, we have such fun together. I imagine this is the kind of fun I would have had with a friend. But I've been such a recluse all my life I never made one.

I know it was my own fault I didn't make any friends, Mum, and I know you just didn't understand why I wasn't more outgoing like Bobby. I don't suppose I'll change much now. But Mrs. Beatty's attention is awful sweet, don't you think?

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I'm feeling guilty about not having the stairway repaired yet. I know you'd be appalled by my procrastination. To tell you the truth, I haven't been able to bring myself to even open the stairwell door. I hope "time will bring peace," as Darlene's card says. By the way, you needn't worry—I got all the thank-you notes sent.

Love,
Dora

March 23, 1990
Dear Mum,

Still not back to work on account of Bobby, who won't go home even though the sheriff told him to. Now he's trying to get a lawyer and take me to court. I just can't fathom him at all. I told him it would cost him more money to take me to court than the few things you left him are worth. That should make him think again—and, anyway, he's got his twenty thousand already.

I know you'd be disappointed at his pettiness but kind of wish you were around to see it.

The other day when Mrs. Beatty was leaving, he was coming up the path and she went right over to him and smacked him in the face! I was watching from the window, and I practically fell down laughing. He was so shocked, and it was obvious he'd been trying to turn on the charm to win her over. I don't know what she said to him, but he just left. I really like her, Mum. No one can ever take your place, but Mrs. Beatty is almost a second mother to me.

This morning we went shopping together and she picked out this beautiful red dress for me. I know you wouldn't like it one bit, and told her so. She asked, "Do *you* like it?" I had to admit I did, so she bought it for me. I don't know when I'll ever wear it. I never go anywhere, and it's certainly too fancy for work or everyday, but she was so keen on my having it I knew it would disappoint her if I said no.

She's also very insistent about my getting a checking account and wants to take me to the bank tomorrow. She almost fell off her chair when I told her I didn't have one, and she gave me a funny look when I told her I'd wanted one once but you said it wasn't a good idea because I had no mind for figures.

I felt like a complete fool. Why didn't you ever tell me that most working people have checking accounts? Sometimes I think you intentionally kept me in the dark about things because you were

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afraid of what I might do if I was more independent. Shame on you, Mum.

Love,
Dora

March 27, 1990
Dear Mum,

I finally went back to work today and made the first step in getting the basement stairs repaired.

Bobby's still hanging around. I see him occasionally peeking through windows, but I never let him in. He looks crazy and I'm a little bit afraid of him.

Work is the same as always, no new faces, the same old letters on the keyboard. Mrs. Beatty met me for lunch today and that seemed to make the day move a bit faster. I kept thinking about you while we were eating and wondering why in ten years you never once met me for lunch. Mrs. Beatty took me to a restaurant and paid, of course. I know you'd be livid if you thought I was squandering my money eating in restaurants.

When I got home, I finally opened the door and looked at those stairs down to the basement. It was horrible that night when I saw you there at the bottom, all twisted. Today my flesh got puckered up when I looked at the railing that had come off in your hand and the place where the stair was missing. We'd argued so often about putting a light above that landing. You said it would cost too much, but now that this house is mine I think I'm going to do it.

That night you died was the first I'd ever spent alone in my life. I left the light on in my room all night long. It seems like it happened an eternity ago, and I still miss you, but writing these letters has helped me a lot, and I don't feel half as bad as I did about it.

I'm going to have a warm bath tonight and will be using your bath salts. I know I wasn't allowed to when you were alive, but I figure being the practical woman you were, you'd rather I use them than have them sit on your vanity forever. I'm also making good use of your French perfumes and nailpolish. Mrs. Beatty came over to help me go through your clothes. I gave her most of them since she's been so kind to me, and she got this crazy notion to give me a manicure and a make-over. You never told me she'd been a beautician! I felt a little weird at first wearing your makeup, but I have to say it really did something to improve me, and I got to asking myself why, after telling me almost every day of my life how plain

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I was, you never encouraged me to use makeup. I remember you saying, "Dora, paint will only make you look worse. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, and you certainly can't do with paint what nature did not intend."

Mrs. Beatty says I'm a true beauty, and although I know she's just being kind, Mr. McCorbet was paying particular attention to me today and complimenting me on my appearance, and a man passing by the bus stop whistled at me.

Love,
Dora

March 29, 1990
Dear Mum,

It's after midnight, but I have to write to you. I can't sleep, I'm so upset. Tonight Bobby really did it, and I fixed him good. You won't believe it, but he actually broke into the house while I was at work and discovered my secret place in the attic.

I've been storing my letters up there, so I know he read everything and found the typewriter and the china and the opal brooch on my black sweater that you tore.

That sneaky little scum. He always thought he was such a big man, running off to Arizona like that and leaving me to do everything. Well, tonight he thought he was some kind of superhero or something, because when I got home from work there he was standing in my kitchen looking crazy and hurling all kinds of accusations at me.

I'd had a really good day at work, and Mr. McCorbet asked me out to dinner and I was feeling really good. You know I've never been out on a date in my life, and I was so excited. I was going to wear my red dress and your Chanel No. 5. And then Bobby comes along and tries to ruin everything.

I asked him if he knew he could be charged for breaking and entering, and he said did I know I could be charged for murder? Well, I wasn't going to let him get away with that. He claimed he'd suspected right from the beginning that I'd killed you, Mum. Can you believe that, trying to cloak his greedy trail with concern for you? As if he'd stick around here for that! It was lucky he was standing with his back against the door leading to the basement, and really lucky that the door was slightly ajar. I just ran into him as hard as I could. He didn't even know what hit him, and bam,

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bam, bam, there he was, at the bottom of those broken stairs all twisted up—just like you, Mum.

I couldn't believe how easy it was, so much easier than when I did it to you. You were so determined to get that brooch off my sweater that I thought you were going to pull me down the stairs with you. (I've always admired your persistence, by the way, Mum.) I didn't even have to change my clothes before I called the police, and that nice sheriff, Mrs. Beatty's friend, came and sat with me for a long time. He wrote the police report without asking me anything. He wrote that Bobby had broken into my house and had accidentally fallen down the stairs.

Mr. McCorbet arrived around then, and he sat with me, too, but now everyone's gone and I've got the light on in my bedroom and I feel so alone, just like on the night you died, Mum.

I think maybe I'll go over to Mrs. Beatty's, even though it's late. She's so kind to me, I'm sure she won't mind talking. And by the way, Mum, Mrs. Beatty thinks I ought to learn to drive. She says it's a real shame your car is just sitting in the driveway going to rust while I'm taking a bus to work every morning. I know you used to tell me that if I ever got a driver's license no pedestrian would be safe, but Mrs. Beatty says anyone can drive, and she's willing to give me lessons free.

Love,
Dora

April 4, 1990
Dear Mum and Bobby,

It was the most lovely day for your funeral, Bobby. All Mum's friends came and I'm getting such a collection of sympathy cards I plan to store in the attic.

It was sad, Bobby, that none of your friends came. I guess Arizona is a long way off, but I've been receiving some cards from them, so they *are* thinking about you. My favorite is the one I got from someone named Margaret Fuller. It has a picture of a beautiful dove on it and the message reads: "May you be strengthened by his memory and find abiding peace." Inside she wrote a note: "Dear Dora, Although I've never met you, I know you were a loving sister to Robert. He spoke of you and your mother often and told me that he wished you lived nearer."

Oh, Bobby, we were never as close as I would have liked, and I miss you so desperately and feel such grief that I think by including

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you in these letters to Mum I can be "strengthened" and find "abiding peace."

I almost forgot to tell you, I got a call from Arizona today, and apparently, Bobby, you didn't make a will, which means I, as your only living relative, inherit everything you had. I'm sure this isn't the way you would have wanted it, but I promise to spend your money wisely and try not to let my "frivolous nature," as Mum always called it, diminish your fortune.

I have to admit I'm happy I won't have to leave this house. I like it here, right across the street from Mrs. Beatty, and I guess I am getting a bit old for apartments and roommates.

The sheriff is coming by tomorrow to take me on a picnic. I think Mr. McCorbet was a bit jealous when I told him, but I promised to accompany him to a dance Friday night. Do you think I did the right thing, Mum?

It's so difficult living alone, having no one but Mrs. Beatty to ask what's right. Not that she minds helping me solve my problems, but I think sometimes I'm imposing, though she never makes me feel this way.

I find solace in the good friends you made over the years, Mum, and perhaps will find solace with some of Bobby's friends. Unfortunately, I have to go to Arizona to collect your things, Bobby. I hope you don't mind if I give Margaret Fuller a call. Of course, I'll send her and all your friends thank-you notes right away, neither of you need worry.

I know how much you loved Bobby, Mum, and I know how long it had been since you'd seen Mum, Bobby. In a way, I find comfort in thinking of the two of you together, laughing at my foibles as you used to.

Love,
Dora

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another distinguished ghost story by

ROBERTSON DAVIES

Our annual Christmas reprint from Robertson Davies' now classic collection of ghost stories, told originally by him at the Christmas parties he attended during his tenure as Master of Massey College, University of Toronto. The collection, High Spirits, *is now available on two audio cassettes from Audio Partners, read by Christopher Plummer . . .*

THE UGLY SPECTRE OF SEXISM

BY ROBERTSON DAVIES

At the College dance last week, a young man, a former member of this College, approached me and screamed—in order to be heard above the music—"Are you going to have a Ghost Story for us this year?" I screamed back, "I really don't know." "Oh, yes, you do," he shrieked, "I'll bet you've got it tucked away in a drawer right this minute." Then he went to the bar to take something for his throat. Because, as those of you who attend modern dances understand, a conversation of that length, conducted while the band is giving its all, is a considerable strain on the vocal cords.

He had put his finger on a sore spot in my mind. I had no Ghost Story, and my dilemma was an ugly one: on the one hand I didn't want to disappoint you, and on the other I shrank from meeting any more College ghosts, because it is always an exhausting, and sometimes a humiliating experience.

After all, this College is well advanced in its eleventh year, and we have had a Ghost Story every Christmas. Ten ghosts, surely, is

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enough for any college? In a modern building, such a superfluity of ghosts is almost a reflection on the contractors. Or could it, on the other hand, be some metaphysical emanation from the spirit of the Founders, who were, to a man, connoisseurs of *bizarrerie*? Or—and this, I assure you, is where the canker gnaws—is there something about me that attracts such manifestations? There are men who attract dogs. There are men of a very different kind who attract women. Can it be that I attract ghosts?

Pondering thus, I wandered out into the quad, where the music was somewhat less oppressive. Yet, even in the chill air I felt myself a prey to melancholy apprehension. What was it about that music that made it so disturbing? It seemed as if it were the spirit of our time, made manifest in sound. Loud, compelling, insistent yet turbulent; rhythmic but always threatening to break the bounds of rhythm and rage into some new and fiercely evocative mode. This was music that seemed to be imploring the gods to answer in all the primal, untrammelled majesty of a storm.

The noise mounted to a climax and I heard cheers from within. The moment had come for which modern dancers wait in worshipping expectation: the percussion man was going to perform a solo. The banging, crashing, and rattling he produced was sheer sound, unhampered by any suggestion of a tune or a tone. It was heaven-storming music, and I felt myself yielding to it. My nerves were fiercely alert.

As I walked toward the College gate, my glance rose, and at once I knew that something was amiss. Or, rather, was missing. Where was the great bull's head which normally presides over the exit from the quad? Not in its place? Impossible. It must be a delusion caused by the excellent supper at the dance. But where was the Bull? Bah! Humbug! I said to myself as I stood looking out into Devonshire Place. The December wind that had been sweeping through it grew, in a matter of seconds, into a whirlwind. Dust, twigs, debris of all sorts was whirling in this tempest. Some of it swept toward me and I became aware that a mass of newspaper was dashing itself against the gate and might well blow through it. I like the quad to be tidy and I pushed it away with my foot. To my amazement, it resisted—with a power that wind alone could not explain. I kicked at it and—how am I to tell you?—it seemed to give a cry, in an almost human voice. The sound of the percussion solo from the Hall became more demanding in its intensity and I lost my self-possession. I kicked and pushed at the mass of newspaper with hands and feet, and the more

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I fought the fiercer it became, until at last it forced itself through the bars of the gate and stood—yes, stood!—before me.

"Thing of evil!" I cried—and even as I spoke I knew that I had once again slipped into the rhetorical manner of speech which these spectres always impose upon me. "Thing of evil, what would you here? Whence, and what are you?"

The mass of newspaper appeared to be winded by our struggle, and its reply, though audible, was incomprehensible to me. But the tone was unmistakably that of a woman's voice.

"Speak up!" I demanded.

The mass of newspaper raised one of its outlying rags of newsprint and pointed toward what would have been, in a human figure, its head.

I leaned down for a closer look, because the figure was considerably shorter than I. At its top, which was twirled up into a sort of point, I was able to make out *Toronto Star*, February 1, 1972.

"You are the *Toronto Star?*" said I, half in fear, half in derision, as academics usually speak when they are dealing with newspapers.

The figure nodded its head, then pointed with what seemed to be its Homemakers' Section toward a headline which was at the place where, if it had indeed been a woman, its bosom would have been found. I put on my reading spectacles and peeped delicately at its bosom. The words there were familiar and made me recoil. They read: THE UGLY SPECTRE OF SEXISM LURKS AT MASSEY COLLEGE.

I remembered that headline. It was on February 1, 1972, that the *Toronto Star* had printed a letter from a young woman who was aggrieved by what she considered the indefensible discrimination of this College against her sex. Not only was this place manifestly elitist, she said, but it was sexist as well, and in the modern world this was not to be endured. I looked at the bundle of newspaper again. There was something feminine about its general outline, certainly, but what was it, and what did it mean?

"Frankly, you don't look like the *Star*—" I began, but the creature had found its voice and burst out in an excited squeak.

"None of that!" it said. "I know you sexists. Next thing you'll be telling me I'm too pretty to be a great national daily. I've come to do a color story on the ugly spectre of sexism that lurks at Massey College. Where do your spectres usually lurk? Point the way and then leave me alone, you old sexist."

"I resent being called a sexist," I said with dignity. "But you are a guest here and I shall treat you with courtesy regardless of your

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rudeness to me. We have no spectres, but I shall gladly offer you some spirits. I could do with a double Scotch myself."

"That'll be fine," said the strange visitor in a somewhat mollified tone. I was about to go to the bar for drinks, but something happened that made it clear that however ragged and rubbishy its appearance, I was in the presence of a supernatural being, and that the atmosphere was strangely fraught. Suddenly, from nowhere, two double Scotches were hovering in the air before us, and I gestured to my companion to accept one. She immediately proved that, ghost or not, she belonged to the newspaper world by taking that which my practiced eye told me was slightly the bigger. After a hearty swig had disappeared into the folds of newspaper, my strange companion spoke again, in a tone that betrayed a little self-doubt.

"This *is* Massey College?" it squeaked.

"You mean you're not sure?" said I.

"The editor wouldn't give me money for a taxi," it said, "so I came on the wind and I've had a rough journey. That's why I'm late."

"Late for what?" I said.

"For striking terror and dismay into your black heart," said the creature. "Because you discriminate against women. Because you are a barnacle on the Ship of Progress. Because you are a miserable Neo-Piscean who is trying to halt the approach of the Age of Aquarius. Because you are a fascist-recidivist-elitist-chauvinist pig. I am here to expose you. Then your nerve will break and the junior Fellows will throw open the gates to women and hail a new dawn."

"You are even later than you think," said I. "The new dawn of which you speak was hailed on May eleventh of this year, when it was decided by our senior fascist-recidivist-elitist-chauvinist pigs, meeting in solemn council, and with the full concurrence of those of our Founders who are still living, that women should be admitted to this College under the same conditions as men, beginning next September."

"Aha! So we drove you to it," said the figure.

"Not in the least," said I. "This college follows a star, but not the *Toronto Star*. You are too late."

The figure seemed to lose height. "You mean there's no ugly spectre of sexism?" it said, in a wistful, papery voice. I felt sorry for the frail little creature.

"Why don't you just take a quick look around, and then go back and say you didn't find anything and it isn't worth bothering about?" I said.

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Once again the figure became shrill. "None of your helpful suggestions!" it squeaked. "None of your masculine gallantry toward the defeated female! I'm onto your game—you want to disarm me with kindness, but you won't do it!"

"I must say you're very hard to please," said I. "And I can't go on arguing with you unless I can call you something. What's your name?"

"You'd better call me Ms.," said the figure.

"To me Ms. has always meant Manuscript," I said, "and you're not a manuscript, or even a typescript. You're that most dismal form of letterpress, an out-of-date newspaper. I think I'll call you Scrap, because you're scrap paper and because you're so scrappy."

To my surprise, Scrap giggled. "Now you're talking like a fellow creature," she said. "How about another Scotch?"

Hardly had I formed the thought than two glasses were in the air between us, and again Scrap grabbed the larger. I thought I saw a rude twinkle where her eye should have been. "Here's my hand up your gown, Master," Scrap said.

I am not to be outdone in colloquialism. "Here's thumbing through your Index," said I. We drank. It was very good whisky, which is not perhaps surprising, as it obviously came from the spirit world. After her second drink, Scrap was quite friendly.

"I think I'll take you up on that offer of a look around," she said. I shall refer to her henceforward as "she," because the more Scrap drank the more feminine she became. "Want to come?"

I nodded. But I was concerned. Where was our Bull?

"Mind you, it has to be understood that you're following," said Scrap. "There's to be none of this chauvinist-pig nonsense of showing the little lady over the place. I don't need a guide."

So off we went. We started with the carrel area, and Scrap was in a perfect ecstasy, dodging in and out among the partitions, disguising herself as the contents of a wastepaper basket, and popping out at me from what she hoped were unexpected places with cheerful squeaks of "Boo!" It was rather like going for a walk with a mischievous dog. But as she dashed ahead of me I noticed that for all her Women's Lib principles she was uncommonly feminine, and now and then, when she was out of sight, I heard that sound which had such a stimulating effect on our Victorian forefathers—the delicate rustle of skirts. It was clear that Scrap was not wanting in feminine

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arts, and if I had been younger, and not a philosopher, I suppose I would have ended up chasing her.

She was delighted with the Chapel, and twitched aside the curtains behind the altar as a likely place for the ugly spectre of sexism to be lurking. She took a long look at our altarpiece and said: "Who's this woman painted inside a star?"

"That is a depiction of Divine Wisdom, always represented as a woman," said I.

"Right on!" said Scrap approvingly.

Then we climbed the stairs, and came to the door of the Round Room. This will stop her, I thought. A spectre might lurk in a place that is full of corners, but to lurk within a circle is an impossibility. And that shows how much I knew about it. Pride came before my fall.

As we entered the Round Room, the sense of being haunted descended upon me like a mist. The room was lit by an eerie, flickering blue light, which moved and stirred so restlessly that for a few seconds I could see nothing clearly. Therefore I was startled when a deep, authoritative voice, which was certainly not that of Scrap, said: "You're late. Just like a woman. I've been expecting you. Sit down."

The speaker was a figure so astonishing and alarming that for a moment I thought that I might swoon. He—certainly it was a he—was tall of figure, huge of chest, slim of flank, and wore elegant evening dress. Not a dinner jacket, which is often seen here, but a white tie, and a tail coat of the most distinguished tailoring. But it was his head that struck awe and terror into my heart. It was huge, and it was the head of a bull. And no common bull, either, but the Bull from over our gate, and from its left ear hung a massive ornament of jet, within which a fleur-de-lis was outlined in diamonds.

"The Massey Bull!" I shrieked.

"Obviously," said the creature.

Scrap was dancing so wildly that she seemed to blow about the room on a breeze. "You said I wouldn't find him, and I have! It's the ugly spectre of sexism that lurks at Massey College!"

An expression passed over the face of the creature which I shall not attempt to describe, but it was enough to cause Scrap to crumble away in alarm. "I am the heraldic bull of Massey College," it said with great dignity. "I am, in a special and exalted sense, the totem-animal of this academic, all-male community. I stand, very properly, at the top of its coat-of-arms, and over its entrance. I am, as you

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may see, unmistakably masculine. I scorn to lurk. I pervade. And I demand to know what you, Master, and presumably this bundle of wastepaper here, mean by proposing to admit women under what I regard, with unchallenged right, as my roof?"

What was I to say? Fortunately, I didn't have to say anything because Scrap began to whirl in the air around the creature, squeaking: "Admit women, did you say? Just you try to keep them out! You'll have me to reckon with. I'm Ms., let me tell you, and here I stay till this place is full of women. I'm going to make you all miserable till you acknowledge that the day of masculine supremacy is over, and you'd better get that through your big hairy head. Masculine, indeed! You earring-wearer! The day of barnyard rule and barnyard ethics is done, and the glorious pennon of Unisex is being unfurled over every bastion of masculine privilege in the civilized world!"

The bull lowered his great head and fixed her with red eyes. He blew a snorting breath from his nostrils that could only mean trouble. I felt that I should say something, and as I didn't know what to say of course I said something foolish.

"Surely you young people can find some grounds of compromise," said I. They both turned on me with such anger that I feared they would attack me. To be manhandled is unpleasant, but it is a far more dreadful thing to be ghost-handled; one's metabolism is never the same afterward.

"You sit down," said the Bull, "we are going to debate this matter, Ms. and I, of the admission of women to Massey College. You shall be referee." And with a sharp sidewise hook of his dexter horn, he tossed me into the red chair in which it is humorously supposed I preside in that room. There was nothing for it but to obey.

"Ladies first," said I, nodding toward Scrap.

She was furious. "There you go," she squeaked, "hoping to disarm me with old-world courtesy. I won't go first. You won't get a word out of me." But then she rushed onward with an extraordinary torrent of speech in which I could only catch a few phrases like "minority-group antagonism," "insensitive to cultural mood," "oppression as an institutionalized social function," "dynamics of victimization," and the like. Coming from one who was supposed not to be speaking at all, it took rather a long time, and the Bull grew impatient, pawed the ground, and tossed his great head. At last he was so angry that flame—yes, flame—burst from his nostrils. Scrap, so highly inflammable, was in serious danger.

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Seemingly, she knew no fear. If I had not seen it with my own eyes I would not have believed what happened next. Scrap, with a furious gesture, tore from the area of her bosom a strip of newsprint and held it in the flame, in which it was immediately consumed. But not before I saw what was printed on it. It was a lingerie advertisement, and it bore a nicely drawn depiction of a brassiere.

"Defiance!" she shrieked. "That is the ultimate act of feminine defiance! Match it, if you can!"

The Bull laughed a deep taurine laugh. "Typical feminine argument," said he. "You refuse to be considered as a sexual object and yet you underline your refusal with a flagrantly sexual gesture. Is that your muddle-headed way of saying that you place no value on your sex?"

"I'll tell you what the value of my sex is," snarled Scrap. "Its value has been established by Xaviera Hollander, the Happy Hooker herself, and it's five hundred dollars a shot."

I was dismayed by this indelicacy, and the ease with which she had fallen into the trap. The Bull sneered. He drew a paper from his breast pocket and laid it on the desk in front of me. "I offer this as evidence in contradiction," said he. "This is the present male rate." I looked at the card and blenched. It contained some intimate information about the erotic tariff of the celebrated racehorse Secretariat. I must say it made Xaviera Hollander look like cheap goods. But my sense of propriety was outraged.

"I refuse to listen to argument on this coarse level," said I. "Whatever arrangements you two wish to make in privacy, as consenting spectres, is nobody's business but your own, but I will have no part in it. This argument must continue, if at all, on a level of decency."

"Very well," said the Bull. "Allow me to remind everyone present that only a month ago a Princess of the Realm, surely an example to all young women, took a public vow to *obey* the man who became her husband. And several young men in this college got up at five o'clock in the morning to hear her do it."

This time it was Scrap who laughed, and it was immediately clear that laughter was something the Bull had not expected. He glared angrily, but he was confused, and Scrap took shrewd advantage of his confusion.

"Are you so besotted with male vanity you don't know what the Princess had in mind?" said she. "Must I show you what feminine obedience means?"

From the mass of paper of which she was composed, Scrap pro-

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duced a sheet printed entirely in red, and she began to trail it, slowly and provocatively, in front of the Bull. I could hardly believe what followed. As if hypnotized, its great head began to roll to left and right as it followed this transfixing red cloak, which gave out the characteristic feminine rustle that I had noticed before.

"Let's see who does the obeying now," whispered Scrap.

Oh, for the pen of an Ernest Hemingway, that I might adequately describe for you the spectacle of art and brutality that followed! Scrap was all femininity as she glided, not rapidly but with splendid grace, around the ring of our Round Room. As she moved, she murmured in a low, compelling, unbearably taunting voice, "Ah, toro, toro! Here—here to me, toro! Aha! Toro! Toro!" And the Bull, unable to help himself, responded to every word and gesture.

Do you know our Round Room? There are twenty-two tall black chairs in it, and on the back of every chair is stamped, in gold, the head of a bull. As Scrap led her victim in his fated dance, I saw that the forty-four eyes of those bulls followed every move: their forty-four nostrils stirred with growing apprehension, and I thought I saw the frothy spittle of fear dripping from their twenty-two tongues.

What was I to do? Where did my sympathies lie? I was, if you will pardon the bluntness of my speech, a quivering ganglion of irreconcilable emotions. I ought to stop the fight. I ought to help the Bull, who was as surely doomed as any bull I have ever seen in a ring. But the skill shown by Scrap thrilled me. Without knowing how it happened, I found myself standing on my desk cheering. I even snatched the rose from my buttonhole and threw it into the ring.

The fight did not last long, but it was splendid while it lasted. More and more furiously the Bull responded to the taunts of Scrap, whose elegance as a matador was beautiful to behold. Her *veronicas*, her *amontillados*, her *tournedos bonne femme* were as fine as anything I have ever seen in the great *corridas* of Madrid. But all the time I wondered: how is she going to finish him off? She has no weapon except that which she had pretended to hold in contempt—her feminine fascination, her charm.

As I have said, the light was ghost-light, and I have but mortal eyes. Suddenly there was a crash and the Bull was down; he had stepped on the rose I had thrown, slipped, and cracked his great head on the corner of one of our curved tables. I was cheering wildly.

But to my astonishment, Scrap was weeping. She stumbled blindly about the Round Room looking for a corner in which to hide her

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head. On the floor lay the Bull, apparently dead. I thought he looked rather noble in death—until he winked at me.

I had no time for reflection, because Scrap was pulling at my sleeve. "Call me a trash-bin," she sobbed, "and let me get away from here."

"But you've won," said I. "I presume you mean to take over the College. Isn't that what all this was about?"

"I didn't mean to kill him," sobbed Scrap. "I only meant to teach him a lesson. What shall I do without him?"

There are certain advantages in being no longer young. One sees a little more clearly, even without one's glasses. "Leave everything to me," said I. "And you really mustn't go away. I think you'll like it here. And I think we're going to like you. Now let me put you in a nice restful place to think it all over until next September."

And, with gallantry which Scrap did not now refuse, I gave her my arm and led her through the labyrinths of the lower part of the College, and there I put her in a very comfortable part of the Library to rest. I took care that she did not see what was printed on the door behind which I locked her, but I don't mind telling you. It said PRINTED EPHEMERA.

Then I hastened back to the Round Room to render first aid to the Bull. I knew that he had simply knocked his head against a reality but I thought his self-esteem might need some delicate attention.

He had gone. The ugly spectre of sexism was lurking at Massey College no longer. And as I walked out into the quad, I saw that he was back in his accustomed place over the gate, and I noticed, as you may notice if you choose, that, noble as he looks, and invincible as he looks, he has an undoubted black eye. But with his right eye, he winked again. And I observed that he was wearing his huge single earring with a new jauntiness, as though he had discovered, in his brief encounter with Scrap, the truth that in the most redoubtably masculine creature there lurks some strain of the feminine.

All seemed peace in the College as I walked again in the quad. Even the music from the dance was peaceful, for the band was playing a Golden Oldie, "You're the Cream in My Coffee."

"You will always be
My necessity—
Can't get along without you—"

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I hummed and winked back at the Bull.

The great clock at Hart House struck a single resonant note. Everybody in the University knows what that sound means. "Great Heaven," I cried, "it must be two o'clock!" And I hurried back to the dance.

DETECTIVERSE

THE END

by ROSEMARIE PROVENCHER

Her plot was pluperfect perfection,
Her characters leapt off the page!
The crime perpetrated—pure genius!
The P.I. an uncanny sage!
So why did she sit so dejected,
With rue and a bottle of gin,
With paralyzed fingers and paralyzed brain?
She didn't know how to begin!

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a *NEW* Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"What? Are you serious?" Rand asked when Leila suggested he speak to her class at the University of Reading before the Christmas recess. "I know nothing about archaeology."

"You don't have to. I just want you to tell them a Christmas story of some sort. Remember last year? The Canadian writer, Robertson Davies, was over here on a visit and he told one of his ghost stories."

"I don't know any good ghost stories."

"Then tell them a cipher story from before you retired. Tell them about the time you worked through Christmas Eve trying to crack that St. Ives cipher . . ."

THE SPY AND THE CHRISTMAS CIPHER

It was just a few days before the Christmas recess at the University of Reading when Rand's wife Leila said to him over dinner, "Come and speak to my class on Wednesday, Jeffrey."

"What? Are you serious?" He put down his fork and stared at her. "I know nothing about archaeology."

"You don't have to. I just want you to tell them a Christmas story of some sort. Remember last year? The Canadian writer, Robertson Davies, was over here on a visit and he told one of his ghost stories."

"I don't know any good ghost stories."

"Then tell them a cipher story from before you retired. Tell them about the time you worked through Christmas Eve trying to crack that St. Ives cipher."

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Ivan St. Ives. Rand hadn't thought of him in years.

Yes, he supposed it was a Christmas story of sorts.

It was Christmas Eve morning in 1974, when Rand was still head of Concealed Communications, operating out of the big old building overlooking the Thames. He remembered his superior, Hastings, making the rounds of the offices with an open bottle of sherry and a stack of paper cups, a tradition that no one but Hastings ever looked forward to. A cup of government sherry before noon was not something to warm the heart or put one in the Christmas spirit.

"It promises to be a quiet day," Hastings said, pouring the ritual drink. "You should be able to leave early and finish up your Christmas shopping."

"It's finished. I have no one but Leila to buy for." Rand accepted the cup and took a small sip.

"Sometimes I wish I was as well organized as you, Rand." Hastings seemed almost disappointed as he sat down in the worn leather chair opposite Rand's desk. "I was going to ask you to pick up something for me."

"On the day before Christmas? The stores will be crowded."

Hastings decided to abandon the pretense. "They say Ivan St. Ives is back in town."

"Oh? Surely you weren't planning to send him a Christmas gift?"

St. Ives was a double agent who'd worked for the British, the Russians, and anyone else willing to pay his price. There were too many like him in the modern world of espionage, where national loyalties counted for nothing against the lure of easy money.

"He's back in town and he's not working for us."

"Who, then?" Rand asked. "The Russians?"

"Perkins and Simplex, actually."

"Perkins and Simplex is a department store."

"Exactly. Ivan St. Ives has been employed over the Christmas season as their Father Christmas—red suit, white beard, and all. He holds little children on his knee and asks them what they want for Christmas."

Rand laughed. "Is the spying business in some sort of depression we don't know about? St. Ives could always pick up money from the Irish if nobody else would pay him."

"I just found out about it last evening, almost by accident. I ran into St. Ives' old girl friend, Daphne Sollis, at the Crown and Piper.

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There's no love lost between the two of them and she was quite eager to tell me of his hard times."

"It's one of his ruses, Hastings. If Ivan St. Ives is sitting in Perkins and Simplex wearing a red suit and a beard it's part of some much more complex scheme."

"Maybe, maybe not. Anyway, this is his last day on the job. Why don't you drop by and take a look for yourself?"

"Is that what this business about last-minute shopping has been leading up to? What about young Parkinson—isn't this more his sort of errand?"

"Parkinson doesn't know St. Ives. You do."

There was no disputing the logic of that. Rand drank the rest of his sherry and stood up. "Do I have to sit on his lap?"

Hastings sighed. "Just find out what he's up to, Jeff."

The day was unseasonably warm, and as Rand crossed Oxford Street toward the main entrance of Perkins and Simplex he was aware that many in the lunchtime crowd had shed their coats or left them back at the office. The department store itself was a big old building that covered an entire block facing Oxford Street. It dated from Edwardian times, prior to World War I, and was a true relic of its age. Great care had been taken to maintain the exterior just as it had been, though the demands of modern merchandising had taken their toll with the interior. During the previous decade the first two floors had been gutted and transformed into a pseudo-atrium, surrounded by a balcony on which some of the store's regular departments had become little shops. The ceiling was frosted glass, lit from above by fluorescent tubes to give the appearance of daylight.

It was in this main atrium, near the escalators, that Father Christmas had been installed on his throne amidst sparkly white mountains of ersatz snow that was hardly in keeping with the outdoor temperature. The man himself was stout, but not as fat as American Santa Clauses. His white beard and the white-trimmed cowl of his red robe effectively hid his identity. It might have been Ivan St. Ives, but Rand wasn't prepared to swear to it. He had to get much closer if he wanted to be sure.

He watched for a time from the terrace level as a line of parents and tots wound its way up the carpeted ramp to Father Christmas's chair. There he listened carefully to each child's request, sometimes boosting the smallest of them to his knee and patting their heads,

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handing each one a small brightly wrapped gift box from a pile at his elbow.

After observing this for ten or fifteen minutes, Rand descended to the main floor and found a young mother approaching the end of the line with her little boy. "Pardon me, ma'am," Rand said. "I wonder if I might borrow your son and take him up to see Father Christmas."

She stared at him as if she hadn't heard him correctly. "No, I can take him myself."

Rand showed his identity card. "It's official business."

The woman hesitated, then stood firm. "I'm sorry. Roger would be terrified if I left him."

"Could I come along, then, as your husband?"

She stared at the card again, as if memorizing the name. "I suppose so, if it's official business. No violence or anything, though?"

"I promise."

They stood in line together and Rand took the little boy's hand. Roger stared up at him with his big brown eyes, but his mother was there to give him confidence. "I hate shopping on Christmas Eve," she told Rand. "I always spend too much when I wait until the last minute."

"I think most of us do that." He smiled at the boy. "Are you ready, Roger? We're getting closer to Father Christmas."

In a moment the boy was on the bearded man's knee, having his head patted as he told him what he wanted to find under the tree next day. Then he received his brightly wrapped gift box and they were on their way back down the ramp.

"Thank you," Rand told the woman. "You've been a big help." He went back up to the terrace level and spent the next hour watching Ivan St. Ives, double agent, passing out gifts to a long line of little children.

"It's St. Ives," Rand told Hastings when he returned to the office. "No doubt of it."

"Did he recognize you?"

"I doubt it." He explained how he'd accompanied himself with the woman and child. "If he did, he might have assumed I was with my family."

"So he's just making a little extra Christmas money?"

"I'm afraid it's more than that."

"You spotted something."

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"A great deal, but I don't know what it means. I watched him for more than an hour in all. After he listened to each child, he handed them a small gift. I watched one little girl opening hers. It was a clear plastic ball to hang on a Christmas tree, with figures of cartoon characters inside."

"Seems harmless enough."

"I'm sure the store wouldn't be giving out anything that wasn't. The trouble is, while I watched him I noticed a slight deviation from his routine on three different occasions. In these cases, he chose the gift box from a separate pile, and handed it to the parent rather than the child."

"Well, some of the children are quite small, I imagine."

"In those three cases, none of the boxes were opened in the store. They were stowed away in shopping bags by the mother or father. One little boy started crying for his gift, but he didn't get it."

Hastings thought about it.

"Do you think an agent would take a position as a department-store Father Christmas to distribute some sort of message to his network?"

"I think we should see one of those boxes, Hastings."

"If there *is* a message, it probably says 'Merry Christmas.' "

"St. Ives has worked for some odd people in the past, including terrorists. When I left the store, there were still seven or eight boxes left on his special pile. If I went back there now with a couple of men—"

"Very well," Hastings said. "But please be discreet, Rand. It's the day before Christmas."

It's not easy to be discreet when seizing a suspected spy in the midst of a crowd of Christmas shoppers. Rand finally decided he wanted one of the free gifts more than he wanted the agents at this point, so he took only Parkinson with him. As they passed through the Oxford Street entrance of Perkins and Simplex, the younger man asked, "Is this case likely to run through the holidays? I was hoping to spend Christmas and Boxing Day with the family."

"I hope there won't even be a case," Rand told him. "Hastings heard Ivan St. Ives was back in the city, working as Father Christmas for the holidays. I confirmed the fact and that's why we're here."

"To steal a child's gift?"

"Not exactly steal, Parkinson. I have another idea."

They encountered a woman and child about to leave the store with

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the familiar square box. "Pardon me, but is that a gift from Father Christmas?" Rand asked her.

"Yes, it is."

"Then this is your lucky day. As a special holiday treat, Perkins and Simplex is paying every tenth person ten pounds for their gift." He held up a crisp new bill. "Would you like to exchange yours for a tenner?"

"I sure would!" The woman handed over the opened box and accepted the ten-pound note.

"That was easy," Parkinson commented when the woman and child were gone. "What next?"

"This might be a bit more difficult," Rand admitted. They retreated to a men's room where Rand fastened the festive paper around the gift box once more, resticking the piece of tape that held it together. "There, looks as good as new."

Parkinson got the point. "You're going to substitute this for one of the special ones."

"Exactly. And you're going to help."

They resumed Rand's earlier position on the terrace level, where he observed that the previous stack of boxes had dwindled to three. If he was right, they would be gone shortly, too. "How about that man?" Parkinson pointed out. "The one with the little boy."

"Why him?"

"He doesn't look that fatherly to me. And the boy seems a bit old to believe in Father Christmas."

"You're right," Rand said a moment later. "He's getting one of the special boxes. Come on!"

As the man and the boy came down off the ramp and mingled with the crowd, Rand moved in. The man was clutching the box just as the others had when Rand managed to jostle him. The box didn't come loose, so Rand jostled again with his elbow, this time using his other hand to yank it free. The man, in his twenties with black hair and a vaguely foreign look, muttered something in a language Rand didn't understand. There was a trace of panic in his face as he bent to retrieve the box. Rand pretended to lose his footing then, and came down on top of the man. The crowd of shoppers parted as they tumbled to the floor.

"Terribly sorry," Rand muttered, helping the man to his feet.

At the same moment, Parkinson held out the brightly wrapped package. "I believe you dropped this, sir."

Anyone else might have cursed Rand and made a scene, but this

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strange man merely grasped the box and hurried away without a word, the small boy trailing along behind. "Good work," Rand said, brushing off his jacket. "Let's get this back to the office."

"Aren't we going to open it?"

"Not here."

Thirty minutes later, Rand was carefully unwrapping the gift on Hastings' desk. Both Parkinson and Hastings were watching apprehensively, as if expecting a snake to spring out like a jack-in-the-box. "My money's on drugs," Parkinson said. "What else could it be?"

"Is the box exactly the same as the others?" Hastings asked.

"Just a bit heavier," Rand decided. "A few ounces."

But inside there seemed to be nothing but the same plastic tree ornament. Rand removed the tissue paper and stared at the bottom of the box.

"Nothing," Parkinson said.

"Wait a minute. Something had to make it heavier." Rand reached in and pried up the bottom piece of cardboard with his fingernails. It was a snugly fitted false bottom. Beneath it was a thin layer of a grey puttylike substance. "Better not touch it," Hastings cautioned. "That's plastique—plastic explosive."

The man from the bomb squad explained that it was harmless without a detonator of some sort, but they were still relieved when he removed it from the office. "How much damage would that much plastic explosive do?" Rand wanted to know.

"It would make a mess of this room. That's about all."

"What about twelve or fifteen times that much?"

"Molded together into one bomb? It could take out a house or a small building."

They looked at each other glumly. "It's a pretty bizarre method for distributing explosives," Parkinson said.

"It has its advantages," Hastings said. "The bomb is of little use until enough of the explosive is gathered together. If one small box falls into government hands, as this one did, the rest is still safe. No doubt it was delivered to St. Ives only recently, and this served as the perfect method for getting it to his network—certainly better than the mails during the Christmas rush."

"Then you think it's to be reassembled into one bomb?" Rand asked.

"Of course. And it's to be used sometime soon."

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"The IRA? Russians? Arabs?"

Hastings shrugged. "Take your pick. St. Ives has worked for all of them."

Rand held the box up to the light, studying the bottom. "This may be some writing, some sort of invisible ink that's beginning to become visible. Get one of the technicians up here to see if we can bring it out."

Heating the bottom of the box to bring out the message proved an easy task, but the letters that appeared were anything but easy to read: MPPMP MBSHG OEXAS EWHMR AWPGG GBEBH PMBWE ALGHQ.

"A substitution cipher," Parkinson decided at once. "We'll get to work on it."

"Forty letters," Rand observed, "in the usual five-letter groups. There are five Ms, five Ps, and five Gs. Using letter frequencies, one of them could be E, but in such a short message you can't be sure."

"GHQ at the end could stand for General Headquarters," Hastings suggested.

Rand shook his head. "The entire message would be enciphered. Chances are that's just a coincidence."

Parkinson took the message off to the deciphering room and Rand confidently predicted he'd have the answer within an hour.

He didn't.

"It's tougher than it looks," Parkinson told them. "There may not be any Es at all."

"Run it through the computer," Rand suggested. "Use a program that substitutes various frequently used letters for the most frequently used letters in the message. See if you hit on anything."

Hastings glanced at the clock. "It's after six and my niece has invited me for Christmas Eve. Can you manage without me?"

"Of course. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Rand."

After he'd gone, Rand picked up the phone and told Leila he'd be late. She was living in England now, and he'd planned to spend the holiday with her.

"How late?" she asked.

"These things have been known to last all night."

"Oh, Jeffrey. On Christmas Eve?"

"I'll call you later if I can," Rand promised. "It might not take that long."

He went down the hall and stood for a time watching the computer

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experts work on the message. They seemed to be having no better luck than Parkinson's people. "How long?" he asked one.

"In the worst possible case it could take us until morning to run all the combinations."

Rand nodded. "I'll be back."

They had to know what the message said, but they also had to find Ivan St. Ives. The employment office at Perkins and Simplex would be closed now. His only chance was that pub where Hastings had spoken with Daphne Sollis. The Crown and Piper.

It was on a corner, as London pubs often are, and the night before Christmas didn't seem to have made much of a dent in the early-evening business. The bar was crowded and all the tables and booths were occupied. Rand let his eyes wander over the faces, seeking out either St. Ives or Daphne, but neither one seemed to be there. He didn't know either of them well, though he thought he would recognize St. Ives out of his Father Christmas garb. He was less certain about recognizing Daphne Sollis.

"Seen Daphne around?" he asked the bartender as he ordered a pint.

"Daphne Jenkins?"

"Daphne Sollis."

"Do I know her?"

"She was in here last night, talking to a grey-haired man wearing rimless glasses. He was probably dressed in a plaid topcoat."

"I don't— Wait a minute, you must mean Rusty. Does she have red hair?"

"Not the last time I knew her, but these things change."

"Well, if it's Rusty she comes in a couple of nights a week, usually alone. Once recently she was with a creepy-looking gent who kept laughing like Father Christmas. I sure wouldn't want *him* bringing gifts to my kids. He'd scare 'em half to death."

"Does she live around here?"

"No idea, mate." He went off to wait on another customer.

So whatever Daphne had told Hastings about her relationship with Ivan St. Ives, they were hardly enemies. He'd been with her recently in the Crown and Piper, apparently since he took on the job as Father Christmas.

Rand thought it unlikely that Daphne would visit the pub two nights in a row, but on the other hand she might stop by if she was lonely on Christmas Eve. He decided to linger over his pint and see

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if she appeared. Thirty minutes later he was about to give it up and head for Leila's flat when he heard the bartender say, "Hey, Rusty! Fellow here's been askin' after you."

Rand turned and saw Daphne Sollis standing not five feet behind him, unwrapping a scarf to reveal a tousled head of red hair. "Daphne!" She looked puzzled for a moment and he identified himself. "Ivan St. Ives introduced us a year or so back. He did some work for me."

She nodded slowly as it came back to her. "Oh, yes—Mr. Rand. I remember you now. Is this some sort of setup? The other one, Hastings, was here just last night."

"No setup, but I *would* like to talk with you, away from this noise. How about the lobby of the hotel next door?"

"Well—all right."

The hotel lobby was much quieter. They sat beneath a large potted palm and no one disturbed them. "What do you want?" she asked. "What did your friend Hastings want last night?"

"It was only happenstance that he met you, though I'll admit I came to the Crown and Piper looking for you. I need to locate Ivan St. Ives."

"I told Hastings we're on the outs."

"I saw him at Perkins and Simplex earlier today."

"Then you've already located him."

"No," Rand explained. "His Christmas job would have ended today. I need to know where he's living."

"I said we're on the outs."

"You were drinking with him at the Crown and Piper just a week or two ago."

She bit her lip and stared off into space. "I don't know where he's living. He rang me up and we had a drink for old times' sake. That's when he told me about the Christmas job. He talked about getting back together again, but I don't know. He works for a lot of shady people."

"Who's he working for now?"

"Just the store, so far as I know. He said he'd fallen on hard times."

Rand leaned forward. "It could be worth some money if you located him for us, told us who he's palling around with."

She seemed to consider the idea. "I could tell you plenty about who he's palled around with in the past. It wasn't just our side, you know."

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"I know."

"But it would have to be after New Year's. I'm going to visit a girl friend in Hastings, on the coast. Is your friend Hastings from there?"

"From Leeds, actually." Rand was frowning. "I need St. Ives now."

"I'm sorry, I can't help you. Perhaps the store has his address."

"I'll have to ask them." Rand stood up. "Can I buy you a pint back at the pub?"

"I'd better skip it now," she said, glancing at her watch. "I want to get home and change. I'm going to Midnight Mass with some friends."

"If you'll jot down your phone number I'd like to ring you up after New Year's."

"Fine," she agreed.

He'd intended to phone Leila after he left Daphne, but back at the Double-C office, Parkinson was in a state of dejection. "We've run every possible substitution of the letter E and there's still nothing. We're going down the letter-frequency list now, working on T, A, O, and N."

"Forty characters without a single E. Unusual, certainly."

"Any luck locating St. Ives?"

"Not yet."

Rand worked with them for a time and then dozed on his office couch. It was long after midnight when Parkinson shook him awake. "I think we've got part of it."

"Let me see."

The younger man produced long folds of computer printout. "On this one we concentrated on the first six characters—the repetitive MPPMPM. We got nowhere substituting E, T, or A, but when we tried the next letters on the frequency list, O and N, look what came up."

Rand focused his sleepy eyes and read NOONON. "Noon on?"

"Exactly. And there's another ON combination later in the message."

"Just a simple substitution cipher after all," Rand marveled. "School children make them up all the time."

"And it took us all these hours to get this far."

"St. Ives didn't worry about making the cipher too complex because he was writing it in invisible ink. It was our good luck that the box warmed enough so that some of the message began to appear."

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"A terrorist network armed with plastic explosives, and St. Ives is telling them when and where to set off the bomb. Do you think we should phone Hastings?"

Rand glanced at the clock. It was almost dawn on Christmas morning. "Let's wait till we get the rest of it."

He followed Parkinson down the hall to the computer room where the others were at work. Not bothering with the machines, he went straight to the old blackboard at the far end of the room. "Look here, all of you. The group of letters following *noon on* is probably a day of the week, or a date if it's spelled out. If it's a day of the week, three of these letters have to stand for *day.*"

As he worked, he became aware that someone had chalked the most common letter-frequency list down the left side of the board, starting with E, T, A, O, N, and continuing down to Q, X, Z. It was the list from David Kahn's massive 1967 book, *The Codebreakers*, which everyone in the department had on their shelves. He stared at it and noticed that M and P came together about halfway down the list. Together, just like N and O in the regular alphabet. Quickly he chalked the letters A to Z next to the frequency list. "Look here! The key is the standard letter-frequency list. ABCDE is enciphered as ETAON. There are no Ns in the message we found, so there are no Es in the plaintext."

The message became clear at once: NOONO NTHIS DAYCH ARING CROSS STATI ONTRA CKSIX. "Noon on this day, Charing Cross Station, track six," Rand read.

"Noon on which day?" Parkinson questioned. "It was after noon yesterday before he distributed most of the boxes."

"He must mean today. Christmas Day. A Christmas Day explosion at Charing Cross Station."

"I'll phone Hastings," Parkinson decided. "We can catch them in the act."

Police and Scotland Yard detectives converged on the station shortly after dawn. Staying as unobtrusive as possible, they searched the entire area around track six. No bomb was found.

Noon came and went, and no bomb exploded.

Rand turned up at Leila's flat late that afternoon. "Only twenty-four hours late," she commented drily, holding the door open for him.

"And not in a good mood."

"You mean you didn't crack it after all this time?"

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"We cracked it, but that didn't do us much good. We don't have the man who sent it, and we may be unable to prevent a terrorist bombing."

"Here in London?"

"Yes, right here in London." He knew a few police were still at Charing Cross Station, but he also knew it was quite easy to smuggle plastic explosives past the tightest security. They could be molded into any shape, and metal detectors were of no use against them.

He tried to put his mind at ease during dinner with Leila, and later when she asked if he'd be spending the night he readily agreed. But he awakened before dawn and walked restlessly to the window, looking out at the glistening streets where rain had started to fall. It would be colder today, more like winter.

The bomb hadn't gone off at Charing Cross Station yesterday. Either the time or the place was wrong.

But it hadn't gone off anywhere else in London, so he could assume the place was correct. It was the time that was off.

The time, or the day.

This day.

Noon on this day.

He went to Leila's telephone and called Parkinson at home. When he heard his sleepy voice answer, he said, "This is Rand. Meet me at the office in an hour."

"It's only six o'clock," Parkinson muttered. "And a holiday."

"I know. I'm sorry. But I'm calling Hastings, too. It's important."

He leaned over the bed to kiss Leila but left without awakening her.

An hour later, with Hastings and Parkinson seated before him in the office, Rand picked up a piece of chalk. "You see, we assumed the wrong meaning for the word 'this.' If someone wants to indicate 'today,' they say it—they don't say 'this day.' On the other hand, if I write the word 'this' on the desk in front of me—" he did so with the piece of chalk "—what am I referring to?"

"The desk," Parkinson replied.

"Right. If I wrote the word on a box, what would I be referring to?"

"The box."

"When St. Ives' message said 'this day,' he wasn't referring to Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. He was telling them Boxing Day. Even if they were foreign, they'd know it was the day after Christmas here and a national holiday."

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"That's today," Hastings said.

"Exactly. We need to get the men back to Charing Cross Station."

The station was almost deserted. The holiday travelers were at their destinations, and it was too soon for anyone to have started home yet. Rand stood near one of the newsstands looking through a paper while the detectives again searched unobtrusively around track six. It was nearly noon and time was running out.

"No luck," Hastings told him. "They can't find a thing."

"Plastique." Rand shook his head. "It could be molded around a girder and painted most any color. We'd better keep everyone clear from now until after noon." It was six minutes to twelve.

"Are you sure about this, Rand? St. Ives is using a dozen or more people. Perhaps they all didn't understand his message."

"They had to come together to assemble the small portions of explosive into a deadly whole. Most of them would understand the message even if a few didn't. I'm sure St. Ives trained them well."

"It's not a busy day. He's not trying to kill a great many people or he'd have waited until a daily rush hour."

"No," Rand agreed. "I think he's content to—" He froze, staring toward the street entrance to the station. A man and a woman had entered and were walking toward track six. The man was Ivan St. Ives and the woman was Daphne Sollis.

Rand had forgotten that the train to Hastings left from Charing Cross Station.

He ran across the station floor, through the beams of sunlight that had suddenly brightened it from the glass-enclosed roof. "St. Ives!" he shouted.

Ivan St. Ives had just bent to give Daphne a goodbye kiss. He turned suddenly at the sound of his name and saw Rand approaching. "What *is* this?" he asked.

"Get away from him, Daphne!" Rand warned.

"He just came to see me off. I told you I was visiting—"

"Get away from him!" Rand repeated more urgently.

St. Ives met his eyes, and glanced quickly away, as if seeking a safe exit. But already the others were moving in. His eyes came back to Rand, recognizing him. "You were at the store, in line for Father Christmas! I knew I'd seen you before!"

"We broke the cipher, St. Ives. We know everything."

St. Ives turned and ran, not toward the street from where the men

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were coming but through the gate to track six. A police constable blew his whistle, and the sound merged with the chiming of the station clock. St. Ives had gone about fifty feet when the railway car to his left seemed to come apart with a blinding flash and roar of sound that sent waves of dust and debris billowing back toward Rand and the others. Daphne screamed and covered her face.

When the smoke cleared, Ivan St. Ives was gone. It was some time later before they found his remains among the wreckage that had been blown onto the adjoining track. By then, Rand had explained it to Hastings and Parkinson. "Ivan St. Ives was a truly evil man. When he was hired to plan and carry out a terrorist bombing in London over the Christmas holidays, he decided quite literally to kill two birds with one stone. He planned the bombing for the exact time and place where his old girl friend Daphne Sollis would be. To make certain she didn't arrive too early or too late, he even escorted her to the station himself. She knew too much about his past associations, and he wanted her out of his life for good. I imagine one of his men must have ridden the train into Charing Cross Station and hidden the bomb on board before he left."

But he didn't tell any of this to Daphne. She only knew that they'd come to arrest St. Ives and he'd been killed by a bomb while trying to flee. A tragic coincidence, nothing more. She never knew St. Ives had tried to kill her.

In a way Rand felt it was a Christmas gift to her.

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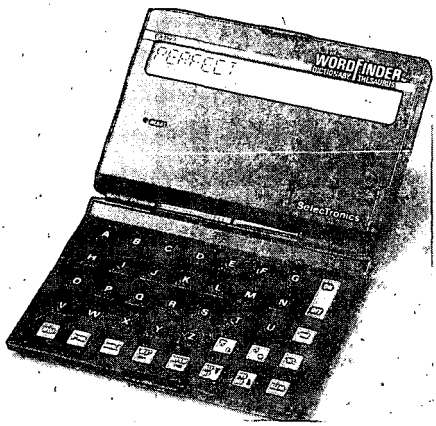

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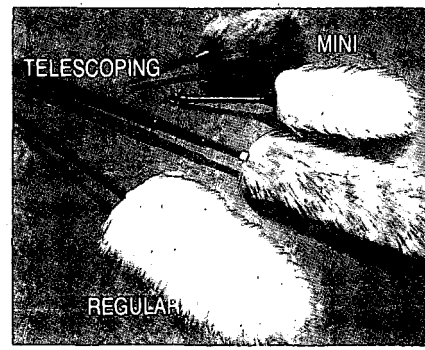

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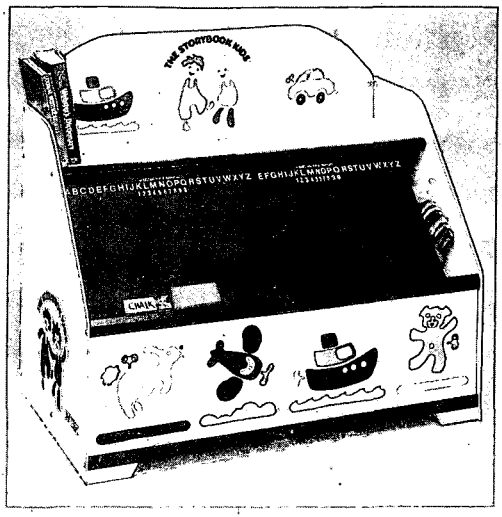
▼ THE FUN CENTER



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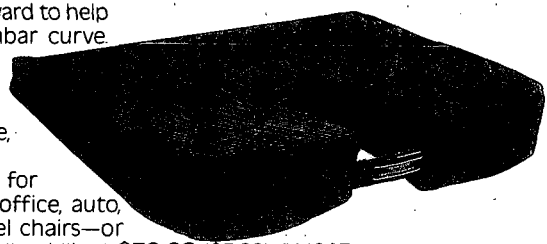

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Sharyn McCrumb is one of the most justly celebrated mystery writers to debut in the past half dozen years. She is perhaps best known for her excellent (and controversial) Edgar-winning paperback original *Bimbos of the Death Sun* (Windwalker, 1987), not the first mystery novel to employ the background of a science-fiction convention—Mack Reynolds' *The Case of the Little Green Men* (1951), Gene DeWeese and Robert Coulson's *Now You See It—Him—Them* (1975), and Richard Purtill's *Murdercon* (1982) come to mind—but surely the most scathing in its satire on the mores of s.f. and fantasy fandom. Character, humor, and social observation are McCrumb's strong suits, and she usually spends half the book setting up the characters and background before she devotes much attention to the mystery puzzle, though she is strong in that area, too.

**** Sharyn McCrumb: *If Ever I Return, Pretty Peggy-O,* Scribners, $17.95. The author's first hardcover may put her in the running for a second Edgar. In the town of Hamelin, Tennessee, the high-school class of 1966 is planning its twenty-year reunion; famous folksinger Peggy Muryan, a recent arrival, is being threatened by a malicious prankster; and Sheriff Spencer Arrowood is trying to cope with both of the above plus his ambivalent memories of older brother Cal, who was killed in Vietnam. Though there is humor, this haunting novel of the Sixties' generation grown older finds the author in a more sober mood.

*** Sharyn McCrumb: *The Windsor Knot,* Ballantine, $16.95. The fifth novel about forensic anthropologist Elizabeth MacPherson shows McCrumb in her more customary comic vein. The marriage plans of Elizabeth and her Scottish fiance Cameron Dawson are accelerated, not for the usual reason but to allow Elizabeth to accompany him to the Queen's Royal Garden Party, to which only spouses may go as guests. There's more humor than mystery here, and Elizabeth's contribution to the detecting is relatively slight, but the reader will have too much fun to carp about such details. (The immediate predecessor in the series, 1988's *Paying the Piper,* delays the mystery plot in a similar way but delivers a stronger puzzle.)

**** Warwick Downing: *A Clear Case of Murder,* Pocket Books, $3.95. Between 1974 and 1976, lawyer Downing wrote a three-book series about Denver private eye Joe Reddman. In a rare example of the second-generation mystery, son David Reddman, a lawyer working for the National Association of Special Prosecutors, begins what I hope is to be his own series. There is no question in the reader's mind that ex-rodeo star Johnny Blue is

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guilty of murder by pickup truck in the death of a Colorado public defender. The question is whether Reddman can nail him in court. This is one of the best trial novels in recent months.

**** William Murray: *The Getaway Blues,* Bantam, $17.95. In his fifth appearance, Shifty Lou Anderson, close-up magician and inveterate horseplayer, gets a job as on-call chauffeur for a wealthy, elegant, and suicidal owner of thoroughbreds. Murray is one of the best of the several writers (including your columnist) specializing in horse-racing mysteries: his understanding of bettor-psychology is unparalleled. The characters are drawn in the highly colored, larger-than-life style that sets readers to casting the movie version with actors living or dead: Lucius J. Bedlington would have been a great part for Clifton Webb.

**** Ngaio Marsh: *The Collected Short Fiction of Ngaio Marsh,* edited and with an Introduction by Douglas G. Greene; International Polygonics, Madison Square, P.O. Box 1563, New York, NY 10159; $19.95. This book will have been out a year by the time you read this, but it's worth hunting for or ordering direct from the publisher. Included are Marsh's only three short stories about Roderick Alleyn (all of which have appeared in *EQMM),* brief profiles of Alleyn and wife Troy, a short true-crime essay and three non-series short stories, and (most notable of all) a substantial courtroom teleplay written for a British TV series. Editor Greene contributes an outstanding eight-page Introduction and a postscript to the play speculating on the unspecified solution Marsh may have had in mind.

*** Len Deighton: *Spy Sinker,* Harper, $19.95. The final book in the second Bernard Samson trilogy spans a ten-year period (1977–87), and ties up loose ends from both the trilogies and the author's best-seller about Nazi Germany, *Winter.* The opening note that the book can be read without reference to the others is true—I've read only *Berlin Game* and seen the TV version of the *Game, Set, Match* trio and am sure a reader totally new to the series would find the story both comprehensible and enthralling—but it's tough to rate in isolation from the other books. How much is new insight, how much technical brilliance a la Alan Ayckbourn's *Norman Conquests* plays, and how much repetition? In any event, this is the work of a master of espionage fiction, and I suspect we still have not seen the last of Bernard or of wife Fiona, who is the real focus of this novel.

*** Ruth Dudley Edwards: *The English School of Murder,* St. Martin's, $15.95. In his third adventure, former British civil servant Robert Amiss, out of work and desperate, takes an undercover job investigating possible murder at the Knightsbridge School of English, whose student body has two distinct classes: the waiters and tarts on the low end and the Beautiful People on the high. This is a highly enjoyable comic mystery that has considerable good-natured fun with national stereotypes.

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*** Tony Hillerman: *Coyote Waits,* Harper, $19.95. A member of the Navajo Tribal Police is murdered, and aged shaman Ashie Pinto is accused. Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, who generally have been more impressive in their solo efforts than in their collaborations, investigate in alternating chapters. Hillerman is too good a pro to turn in a less than readable and entertaining novel, but this one surely ranks in the bottom third of his distinguished series. For Hillerman nearer top form, try *The Jim Chee Mysteries* (Harper, $15.95), an omnibus gathering *People of Darkness, The Dark Wind,* and *The Ghostway.*

*** Robert Campbell: *The Gift Horse's Mouth,* Pocket Books, $17.95. The Democratic machine in Chicago may be crumbling, but precinct captain Jimmy Flannery, a young man with the nostalgic sensibility of an old-timer, is still on the job watching out for his flock. In his seventh case, he looks into the seemingly accidental death of Goldie Hanrahan, longtime assistant to political boss Ray Carrigan, during an early-morning ride in Saganashkee Slough. As with Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe series, the charm of the Flannery books lies in its gallery of continuing characters—but there's a clever mystery plot here as well.

*** E. Richard Johnson: *Dead Flowers,* International Polygonics, $17.95. Johnson won an Edgar for *Silver Street* (1968), the first Tony Lonto mystery. In his latest case, a solidly professional procedural in the vein of Ed McBain's 87th Precinct, Lonto tries to solve a pair of drug-related murders, one of a florist who hated flowers and the other of a fellow cop, in time to escape for his annual vacation.

** Robert J. Randisi: *Separate Cases,* Walker, $18.95. New York boxer-turned-private-eye Miles Jacoby investigates at the widow's behest the murder of a fellow operative, who was ostensibly the victim of a serial killer. Meanwhile, it is clear to the reader and the other characters, but not to Jacoby, that he is developing a drinking problem. The likeable and individual shamus was in much better form in 1984's *Full Contact,* but this is a fast-reading, undemanding novel with the author's customary inside jokes and mystery references. (From Randisi the editor comes the fourth in the notable series of Private Eye Writers of America anthologies, *Justice for Hire,* Mysterious Press, $18.95.

Sherlockians will find much valuable information in Gary Lovisi's latest bibliographic guide, *Sherlock Holmes: The Great Detective in Paperback* (Gryphon Publications, P.O. Box 028-209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209; $19.95 hardcover, $9.95 paper), especially interesting (to me, at least) on the book-length pastiches of the past couple of decades. The enthusiastic annotations could use some editing, but the coverage is broad and many handsome black-and-white cover reproductions have been included.

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a *NEW* Christmas story by

CLIONA O'CEALLAIGH and ELEANOR SULLIVAN

Cliona O'Ceallaigh was eleven years old when she posed for the cover of this issue and collaborated on "The Purloined Treasures." Cliona's father is the Irish consul-general in New York, her mother teaches at the United Nations International School, and her brother Ronan appeared on the cover of the Mid-December issue (with actor Malachy McCourt) a year ago. Cliona reads every issue of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine *she can get her hands on, just as her father did as a boy in Ireland.*

Eleanor Sullivan is the editor of EQMM and the author of a number of stories in past issues of EQMM and elsewhere, usually under a pseudonym. The most recent of these, "Ted Bundy's Father" as by Ruth Graviros (in the November 1989 issue), was nominated for an Edgar for best short story of the year . . .

THE PURLOINED TREASURES

by CLIONA O'CEALLAIGH and ELEANOR SULLIVAN

Was Jake asleep? There were times when she could tell for sure—when he was snoring, for instance. He couldn't fake that. He *wouldn't* fake that. And when he tossed in his sleep. But when he lay perfectly still and quiet in the other twin bed with his back to her—well, she couldn't be sure, could she?

Mrs. Beekman turned in her bed and looked out at the tops of the trees lining the Manhattan street. You'd never guess it was almost Christmas, it was so hushed. Usually at this time of year people were in and out of the neighborhood bars and restaurants until all hours of the night. But it was as silent as after-hours Macy's out

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there tonight. Even so, she couldn't sleep. Maybe it was the lights in the windows. Jake always argued for turning them off when they went to bed, but that made no sense. They were meant to lead the Christ Child on His way, weren't they?

Mrs. Beekman peered at the bedside clock. One fifty-six. She wasn't the least bit sleepy. Maybe there was a good movie on television. There was usually something worth watching this time of night. She'd make a cup of decaffeinated tea and watch until she felt drowsy. She threw back the covers, found her slippers with her feet, reached for her yellow robe on the chair by the windows, and pulled it on as she left the room, stopping to close the door all but a few inches behind her.

As if that would keep him from hearing the television, Jacob Beekman thought from his bed. It never occurred to the woman to read a book.

Never mind, her sleeplessness solved his problem: it meant she would still be asleep when he left in the morning. The tenants' storeroom had been locked when he came home this evening with her Christmas gift, and Billy, the only building personnel authorized to admit tenants to leave things there or take things away, wasn't in. Jake had considered leaving the gift with a neighbor, but they really had no close neighbors any more and the gift was so pricy he'd find it hard to forgive anyone if something happened to it while it was in their care.

It was a silver alms dish for the dole cupboard. Jacob's partner, Harold Sutton, had brought it back from his most recent buying trip in Florence. It was the perfect gift for Honey. Jake knew it when he uncrated it. He knew it when he arranged for its display in a far corner where it would be overshadowed by showier items from this and earlier shipments. He knew it when he put it in the shopping bag tonight before leaving the shop. No need to pay for it, of course. Harold had forgotten the piece long ago. He was too lazy to participate in any inventory or any other kind of petty accounting. He left that and the clerking to Jake while he went off on his grand buying tours and wined and dined their most affluent customers—and gave lavish parties for them, to which Jake and Honey were never invited any more. Jake didn't like parties, but it rankled. He supposed Harold preferred customers to forget the fact that their antique shop was a partnership—he was an egoist like none other Jake had ever met—but Honey was hurt when the invitations had stopped about

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six years ago. She was always after Jake to speak to Harold about it, but he never had and never would. Their partnership worked perfectly well for Jake as it stood.

Jake plumped up his pillow and settled down to sleep. From the living room came the sound of Judy Garland singing "The Trolley Song." All he had to do in the morning was salvage the shopping bag from the hall closet and put it in the storeroom on his way to the shop. Honey had been in the kitchen when he arrived home and hid it there. She had uncovered other surprise gifts in the past—in fact, her curiosity about mysterious packages had cost him a small fortune through the years, because a gift discovered early meant another gift was expected—but he was certain she hadn't been aware he'd come in carrying anything and she hadn't checked the closet tonight. Honey was curious and avaricious and clever, but he had learned to play her games—and if worse came to overprying worst he could always surprise her with nothing on Christmas morning.

Right, he told himself. Dream on.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience," Billy said as he unlocked the storeroom door. "It's for your own protection, of course, but it's a shame it's come to this."

When the Beekmans first moved into the apartment house and for many years after, the storeroom had been freely accessible, but then the theft of some extremely valuable objects had put the room under lock and key. Even then, valuables disappeared and Billy had been appointed sole caretaker last year after an expensive tea service had gone missing. He didn't like it much, it being even more inconvenient for him than for the tenants, and especially since it hadn't completely solved the problem. The management was talking about installing private locked bins. Welcome to the twentieth century.

"It's an inside job," he told Jake. "Got to be. Someone's managed to make a copy of my key, don't ask me how. If it keeps up, it'll be my job for sure."

Jake patted him on the shoulder. "Over my dead body, Billy. Here, why don't I leave it just inside the door." He indicated a space on a low shelf and fit the plain brown bag neatly toward the back. "Any problem with that?"

"Not with me," Billy said.

It was almost five and Jake was worn out. The Christmas season always brought in a tiresome assortment of new and old customers

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with impossible requests and all-too-familiar ones. The predictable included an interest in religious antiques, small and large, from apostle spoons, amen glass, and cruets to sacristy cupboards and tapestries. Then there were the items suggested by the holiday—sleigh beds and reindeer bed knobs and candle-related objects: snuffers, candlesticks, candle boxes, and the like.

George William Roberts III had been in just after lunch with a new woman. George was one of Beekman and Sutton's best customers, a well stuffed, unmarried socialite who had introduced one woman after another to the shop over the years, encouraging them to collect, at his expense (no philanthropist, George), whatever struck their fancy. This had been mirrors in the case of Dorothy Minton. Berry spoons with the Fitzpatrick woman. Tiles, toilet articles, and fans with others. In the case of that interior decorator, what was her name, figurines. "Remind me not to commission her to decorate my apartment," George had said, rolling his eyes, the next time he came by the shop—alone. George's own taste was Masculine: card tables, flasks, tavern glass, weapons. Today he had left with a wicked-looking flail called a holy-water shaker, priced over the top. He had his eye on a hunting chair Jake and Harold were holding at bay. Those were the conspiracies that were the glue and cement of the partnership. Jake and Harold loved the intrigue.

A beautifully dressed young Spanish couple were admiring a pear-wood clock when Jake was called from their side to the telephone. It was a regular customer asking him to recommend the best local dealer in scenic wallpaper. Replacing the receiver, Jake saw that the couple had lost interest in the clock and were inspecting some Scottish hall-marks. He wished they would leave—preferably with a purchase, of course—so he could put things in order and get home at a reasonable hour. Honey had phoned to say she was shopping but would be home no later than seven. That meant one of her savory stews was simmering in the crockpot and they could eat at their mutual convenience. She would bring home some crusty bread and fresh salad greens. His vintage wine was always at the ready. There *were* times when he wouldn't trade his marriage for another.

When Jake let himself in just before eight, the lights were on, the table set, and he could hear Honey buzzing around in the kitchen. "Hi, dear," she called to him. He greeted her and, whistling contentedly, hung up his coat and muffler in the closet.

Then, turning toward the dining area, he saw it!

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The silver alms dish. The one in the storeroom—the one he had left in the storeroom! It was on the dole cupboard, just where he had pictured she would put it when he gave it to her!

No, it *couldn't* be the same one. She'd been shopping. This just looked like the other one—they were rare, but not one of a kind. He walked over to it, picked it up gingerly, and turned it over. His heart skipped a beat. There it was, the tracing of a deep jagged scratch that centuries of polishing had not been able to mask.

Honey came from the kitchen carrying a tray of cheese and crackers and brushed his face with her lips. "Do you like it?" she asked. "It's an alms dish. It's—"

"I know what it is, for God's sake."

Her face and the room behind it were bobbing in a strange way.

"What's the matter? Don't you like it? I saw it when I was Christmas shopping, and you know I can't resist buying something for us when I'm shopping."

He certainly did know that. And what an easy and convincing lie it was!

He forced his eyes away from her and looked around the dancing room at all the possessions they'd accumulated in the past few years in the same sudden fashion. What did she do—bring something of theirs to the storeroom and leave with something of someone else's? Come to that, she didn't need to bring something in to take something out, although it was certainly easier to smuggle something out if you went in with a carton or a shopping bag. In the case of the alms dish, of course, she could have walked out with it boldly and Billy would have thought it was all right—although she couldn't have known that. All she really needed to know she obviously knew: Billy didn't care what tenants removed from the storeroom as long as they acted confident and polite about it.

Jake walked to the sofa and sat down heavily. Honey followed with the cheese tray and put it before him on the coffee table. "I'll be back with the drinks," she said. Straightening, she appraised him. "You're tired, are you, darling? Take off your shoes and be comfortable. I won't be a minute."

Jake did not take off his shoes. His eyes scanned the room, willing it to be still. He observed the empty copper birdcage hanging near the window, the Ching brush jar on the end table, the ceramic Sung cup stand on the mantel—all acquired by Honey, "shopping" alone, over the past year. None of these was from Beekman and Sutton, though she could have found better pieces there—at discount.

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Suddenly something jarred his memory and he looked with horror at the magnificent silver tea service on the table in the far corner. Honey had introduced him to it last year as a great bargain she had bought with part of the nestegg her parents had left her. It was the theft of a neighbor's silver tea service that had caused the management to place the storeroom under tight security—only a few months after Honey had produced it! He had never connected the incidents before!

No *wonder* she no longer invited neighbors in. She couldn't know which ones she'd stolen from. Or even if she could, she wouldn't know who might recognize items that had formerly belonged to other tenants in the building. Jake could understand the problem all too well. There was no way he could invite Harold and his wife to the apartment once he'd presented Honey with her first treasure purloined from the shop three years ago—always making the excuse to Honey that since no invitations had been forthcoming from the Suttons for such a long time, they should back off socially as well.

Jake managed to get through drinks and dinner without betraying his confusion. He had Honey's self-centered conversation to thank for that. When dinner was over and she again suggested he was tired, he was all too relieved to escape to his study with a bottle of brandy, Vivaldi, and *The Times*.

But it was impossible to concentrate on the newspaper or Vivaldi. His mind kept returning to Honey's kleptomania. He would be taking stock of things in the apartment for days. How sad, he thought, that she had deprived herself of friendship with the neighbors for the sake of these possessions. But then, of course, so had he denied them both visits from the Suttons.

Jake let the newspaper fall to the floor. But the Suttons had stopped inviting the Beekmans over to their place long before that. Holy Christmas, he thought. Why *had* Harold's invitations stopped? There had never been any misunderstanding between the couples as far as Jake could figure out.

But the more he thought about it now, the more he feared he understood. Did the conspiracies that were the glue and cement of his partnership with Harold reach much, much farther than he had dreamed? He thought of Honey's favorite lament, "You can't trust *any*body any more, can you?"

Right, my dear, he thought wryly, it's all humbug.

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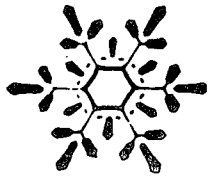

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a *NEW* Miss Crindle story by

MALCOLM GRAY

Jason was nine years older than his sister Harriet and he had no use for the season of goodwill. The only good thing about it to his mind was the profit he made on his flock of chickens and turkeys. He was damned if he was going to give any of them away to layabouts who weren't prepared to get off their backsides and work. He said as much to Harriet.

"Layabouts!" she exclaimed furiously. "Do you call old Mrs. Randall a layabout?"

"It's her husband's job to provide for her, not mine."

"When he's nearly eighty and crippled with arthritis?"

A lovely Christmas story, evocative and jolly and sweet, one we predict will be reprinted often in years to come . . .

MISS CRINDLE AND FATHER CHRISTMAS

by MALCOLM GRAY

Christmas comes reluctantly to Much Cluning. Huddling in its valley, the village looks even drearier than usual under grey December skies. There is no tree outside the village hall, and the single string of fairy lights along the High Street hardly creates an air of festivity. The housewives complain about the extra work Christmas brings and the men about the expense. They only do it for the kids, they say. All the same, it is doubtful if they really mean it, or if they would want to see the season abolished even if they could, and a fair number go to church or chapel on Christmas morning.

A few days before Christmas last year, Harriet Richards stood in

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the yard at her brother's farm giving him a piece of her mind. At twenty-two, Harriet was as generous and warm-hearted as she was pretty. "Do you have to be such a Scrooge?" she demanded angrily.

"Go away," Jason told her coldly. He was nine years older than his sister and he had no use for the season of goodwill. The only good thing about it to his mind was the profit he made on his flock of chickens and turkeys. He was damned if he was going to give any of them away to layabouts who weren't prepared to get off their backsides and work. He said as much to Harriet.

"Layabouts!" she exclaimed furiously. "Do you call old Mrs. Randall a layabout?"

"It's her husband's job to provide for her, not mine."

"When he's nearly eighty and crippled with arthritis?"

"Ach!" Jason said, disgusted.

"And she's not the only one," Harriet went on. "There's Josie Gardner with her three kids. And Bert Renwick and Phoebe," she added, forestalling her brother's attempt to interrupt her. "It's not their fault they can't afford anything but the bare necessities."

"They get their pensions," Jason retorted. "And benefits. They wouldn't get those if people like me didn't pay too damned much in taxes."

"Oh," Harriet said, exasperated, "I don't know how Sheila puts up with you!" And, turning, she started toward the house.

"If you think I breed those birds to feed all the lame ducks in the village, you'd better think again!" Jason called after her.

There were times when she could strangle him, Harriet thought furiously. It wasn't as if he couldn't afford three or four turkeys. By local standards, he was well off. But he seemed to feel that people expected him to give them. It put him on the defensive, and he resented it.

Her sister-in-law was in the kitchen. "Have you and Jason been arguing again?" she asked, amused.

"You could say so." Harriet, still boiling with indignation, explained.

"He works hard," Sheila reminded her. "And he's inclined to think other people don't. There's so much to do at this time of year, he gets worn out."

"He could afford to pay another man if he wasn't so mean," Harriet said bitterly. "Anyway, it's not just this time, it's always."

Soon afterward, she left. Sheila watched her go, thinking.

Later that evening Harriet had a very public quarrel with Colin

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Loates, her boy friend. Nobody who heard it was quite sure what it was about, but Harriet went home in tears.

Miss Crindle met her in the street the next day. Miss Crindle was a large woman with greying hair and a cheerful manner. Until her retirement three years ago, she had taught at Much Cluning Primary School for more than thirty years, and both Harriet and Colin had been among her brightest pupils. So had Jason, who hadn't been as clever as his sister but by hard work had gained a scholarship to Leobury School and gone on to university. Harriet could have gone, too, but she preferred to stay at home and work with the horses her father bred for show jumping.

Colin had been the brightest of the three, a cheeky little boy with charm and a talent for mischief. Miss Crindle had never quite forgiven him for leaving school at sixteen to go into his father's grocery shop.

"And how is Colin?" Miss Crindle inquired that morning.

Harriet looked surprised. "Haven't you heard, Miss Crindle? I thought everybody had. We had a row last night and it's all over."

Miss Crindle noticed that Harriet's left eye was twitching and that she looked embarrassed. All the same, she didn't seem too distressed. She had always been a sensible girl, Miss Crindle thought, and things were different nowadays. In her time, if a girl and her boy friend split up she would be upset for days. "I'm sorry," she said.

Harriet shrugged. "I'll get over it," she said ruefully.

Miss Crindle was sure she would. A girl like Harriet, vivacious and attractive, would find no shortage of young men.

That afternoon, Colin, driving back from Leobury, slewed off the road into a ditch two miles from the village. He explained that he had swerved to avoid a pheasant and skidded, but the popular theory was that his mind hadn't been on his driving, he was thinking about Harriet and their row. Whatever the cause, his car was well and truly stuck and he had to walk to the nearest house and phone the garage to come and tow him out.

They were still doing it when Billy Powis, having run all the way home, blurted out breathlessly to his mother that he had just seen Santa Claus. Mary Powis was busy making mince pies. She laughed but didn't pay too much attention. She was used to her son's tales.

"Oh, dear?" she said.

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"But I did, Mum," the seven-year-old insisted.

"Had he got his sledge and reindeer?"

Billy hesitated. He was a truthful little boy and he couldn't really remember, he had been too excited. "He'd got something," he mumbled. More certainly he added, "And he had a sack over his shoulder."

"Where was he?"

"I told you, at the edge of Brackett's Wood. He went into the trees."

"You shouldn't make up stories, Billy," Mary told him mildly. "It's telling fibs, and that's naughty."

"I did see him," Billy persisted. He was learning early that it is bad enough to be suspected when one is guilty, but much worse when one is innocent. "He was all in red, with white stuff on his coat, and he had a big red hood and boots. Like he does when he comes to our school party."

Oh, dear, Mary thought. She decided that the best course would be to ignore her son's tale. "Go and wash your hands," she said.

At the same time, Sheila Richards was trying without success to ring her sister-in-law. Harriet's mother told her Harry was out. She didn't know where, but she didn't suppose she would be long. Sheila thanked her and said she would try again later.

Billy Powis wasn't the only inhabitant of Much Cluning to see Father Christmas. Two other people saw him, and they were grown-ups. The first was George Townley, the owner of the general store-cum-post office. While Billy was running home to tell his mother what he had seen, George was returning from visiting his sister at Little Cluning. As he drove down the hill into the village, he saw a figure in red with a hood and carrying a sack disappear into the trees beside the road. He was unwise enough to mention it to one of his customers, and soon the story was all over the village. George Townley had started seeing things, and he believed in Santa Claus.

It had been getting colder during the day, and about five o'clock it started to snow. By the time most of Much Cluning went to bed, there was a three-inch covering over everything and it was still snowing. It stopped during the night, but the temperature dropped further.

The second adult to see Father Christmas was Miss Crindle. At one o'clock in the morning of December the twenty-third, she had to get out of bed to go to the bathroom. On her way back, she looked out of the window. It was a fine clear night with a moon. There was

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never much noise in the valley, but now every sound was muffled by the thick layer of snow.

Just across the road, a figure dressed in scarlet and white, its head covered by a hood, was turning the corner round the back of the Renwick's cottage. It was bowed under the weight of the sack slung over its right shoulder. Miss Crindle blinked. There were no children's parties at that hour, and any devoted father who was inclined to go to the lengths of dressing up to deliver his offsprings' presents would hardly do so two days before Christmas.

Miss Crindle told herself that if it wasn't a fond father, it must be a burglar. She considered calling the police. But she disliked the idea of being thought an overimaginative old fool and, anyway, everybody knew the Renwicks were almost destitute. No burglar would try his luck there. She climbed back into bed, and the next day she kept what she had seen to herself.

She said nothing even when Phoebe Renwick, who was well over seventy and worn out from caring for her invalid husband, told her her news. When she came down that morning and opened the back door, there on the doorstep there had been a parcel wrapped in gift paper. In it there was a small turkey already plucked and drawn and a tiny Christmas pudding.

"I couldn't believe it," Phoebe said. She was close to tears. "We haven't been able to have a turkey for over twenty years. Not since soon after Bert was first ill and had to give up work. We can't keep it, of course, it wouldn't be right, but it was a lovely thought."

"Of course you can keep it," Miss Crindle told her with spirit.

"No. We were brought up not to accept what we hadn't paid for, or to ask for charity, and we never have, neither of us."

"You call a present charity? Anyway," Miss Crindle added reasonably, "who would you give it back to?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Phoebe admitted.

"You keep it and be glad there are people in the village who think of others," Miss Crindle told her. "You can say a prayer for them in chapel on Christmas morning."

The old lady's eyes moistened. "I will tonight, too," she said.

Busy with her thoughts, Miss Crindle went back indoors and resumed the cleaning she had been doing when she heard Mrs. Renwick calling her. Who was the kind soul who had left the parcel on the old couple's step? She had no doubt that it was the person in Santa Claus costume she had seen during the night, but who was he? Or she?

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Not that it mattered: if somebody wanted to do the old couple a good turn surreptitiously, good luck to them. Only why the fancy dress? Such ostentation seemed out of keeping with leaving the parcel secretly in the middle of the night. It was like a disguise, and it made her a little uneasy.

The Renwicks weren't the only beneficiaries of Much Cluning's own Santa Claus: the Randalls, Josie Gardner, and an elderly lady named Willings with a crippled son had found similar parcels at their back doors that morning. By evening the story was all over the village.

Miss Crindle heard it, and she wondered still more.

Neither of the Richards had heard about the parcels. Bracketts Farm was a mile out of Much Cluning and they'd been busy there all day. Thus there was no reason for Sheila to suspect anything when Jason came into the kitchen during the afternoon and asked her, "Has Mrs. Grundy been for her bird?"

Sheila had been right, he was tired. The woman who helped deal with the turkeys was ill with flu and he had been driving himself hard for days. He was also suspicious.

"No," Sheila answered without looking up from what she was doing at the sink. "She said she'd come tomorrow."

Jason swore.

"Why, what's the matter? It doesn't make any difference."

"It's gone."

Sheila looked up then. "What do you mean?"

"What I say," Jason told her angrily. "It's clear enough, isn't it? It's been pinched."

His wife stared at him. "Are you sure?" she asked. But she could see from Jason's face he was. "Have any of the others gone?"

"I don't know. I was only looking for hers."

"Can't she have another one?" Sheila tried to be practical, but she knew it wouldn't assuage Jason's anger.

"Of course she bloody well can't," he retorted. "The others are all sold, you know that. And you know how fussy she is."

Sheila did know. Mrs. Grundy lived at Much Cluning Hall and, although she was pleasant enough, she disliked being thwarted or inconvenienced. Her manner implied that she expected her life to run as smoothly as the Rolls-Royce her husband drove. Oh, God, Sheila thought, it looked like being a miserable Christmas. Jason

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would be in a foul mood for days. A terrible thought occurred to her. "Hadn't you better count them?" she asked.

"I'm going to."

Jason strode across the yard to the big shed where the dead birds, plucked and drawn, were laid out in rows along the shelves. Sheila followed and watched while he counted them. There should be ninety, she knew. Christmas turkeys might be profitable, but they were only a sideline to the main business of the farm, the crops and sheep.

"There are four gone!" Jason shouted. "Four! That's the best part of fifty pounds!" He turned furiously. "I'm going to ring the police!"

"Jason, do you think—?" Sheila asked weakly.

But he was in no mood to pay attention, and she followed him uneasily into the house.

It was nearly an hour before P.C. Tom Roberts arrived. He had been at the site of a road accident four miles away and the theft of four turkeys hadn't seemed like the crime of the century, even in Much Cluning. Clearly Jason Richards didn't agree with him.

"They must have got in during the night," he said. Waiting had done nothing to soothe his anger. "You can see their tracks."

He led the way through the churned-up slush in the yard, past the farm buildings to a small meadow bounded on the far side by a low hedge. It was still freezing hard, and the snow, several inches deep, was crisp and unbroken save for a clearly defined set of footprints leading from the yard to the hedge near the point where it met the road. Jason had said "they," Roberts thought, but there was only one set. Smallish prints, too.

"Looks like he came this way," he agreed. "Was the shed locked at night?"

"No." Jason sounded as if he were daring the policeman to criticize him. "The padlock's fastened with a peg. We've never had anything stolen before."

Roberts walked back across the yard.

"Where are you going?" Jason demanded.

"Don't want to disturb the tracks then, do we, sir?" Roberts said. He walked along the road and across to the point where, it seemed, the thief had forced his way through the hedge. There was still just enough light for him to make out the tuft of material caught on a twig. He picked it out carefully and frowned. It was bright-red and thin. Hardly the sort of clothing a man would wear to go stealing

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turkeys on a freezing-cold night. Not what most men would wear at any time, come to that. He tucked the fragment away between two pages of his notebook and returned to where the farmer was watching.

The turkeys must have been stolen on one of the last two nights, Jason told him. He had counted them two days ago.

Tom Roberts lived in the village. He knew about George Townley's seeing a figure dressed like Santa Claus disappearing into Brackett's Wood and about the mysterious parcels which had appeared on certain doorsteps last night. There had been four of them, each one containing a turkey. And four turkeys had been taken from Jason's shed. Roberts was well aware of the dangers of putting two and two together and making sixteen, but it looked to him very much as if some joker had been playing twin roles, Robin Hood and Santa Claus.

Of all the people in the village, he could think of only one who possessed the sort of mind to think up a ploy like that and the cheek to carry it out: Colin Loates. Colin had never been suspected of dishonesty, but he was—what was the word?—unpredictable. Sometimes his sense of humor ran away with him. After all, everybody knew Jason Richards could well afford the loss of four birds, and the recipients of the parcels were genuinely deserving cases. If it had been up to him personally, Roberts would have felt inclined to say, "Good luck to him," and write the case off as unsolved. But it wasn't, and theft was theft, however good the motive. So he promised Jason he would make inquiries and went to see Colin.

He found him at his father's shop, making up orders for the next day.

When Colin heard why he was there, he laughed. "Serve Jason right," he said.

"You've no idea who might have done it?" Roberts asked him.

"Me? No. I don't know why you should come to me about it. You're the one who's supposed to know about all the crime that goes on here."

"Where were you the last two nights?" Roberts asked him.

"What time?"

"Anytime."

"Home in bed."

They eyed each other. Colin seemed to think the whole business was a great joke, and that annoyed Roberts a little. He looked down

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at the other man's feet. They must be size nines, at least. The boots which had made the tracks in the snow on Jason Richards' meadow had been no bigger than sevens. All the same, "Have you got any wellingtons?" he asked.

"Course I have," Colin answered.

"Where are they?"

"In the boot of my car. Why?"

"Do you mind if I have a look at them?"

"Not if you want to."

They went out to the yard at the back of the shop where Colin's old Escort was parked. He opened the boot and brought out a pair of worn grey wellingtons. Roberts studied them. They were size ten.

"All right, thanks," he said.

Colin just grinned. "Do you think I took Jason's turkeys?" he asked.

Roberts didn't answer.

Miss Crindle heard about the theft the next morning when she was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping. It seemed to justify her fears, and she decided that she must talk to Tom Roberts.

"You think the turkeys the Renwicks and the others got were the ones somebody stole from Jason Richards' shed, don't you?" she asked him.

"I can't say, Miss Crindle," the policeman replied cautiously.

"Of course you can, everybody else is." Miss Crindle swept his objection aside. "And you suspect you know who it was, don't you?"

Roberts eyed his visitor. Muffled up in what looked like two or three layers of jumpers and cardigans under her coat, she looked bigger than ever. It would have been easy to put her down as a silly busybody, but Roberts knew better. Miss Crindle was an intelligent woman. And if she took a keen interest in what went on in Much Cluning, she was no mischief-maker. "We're pursuing our inquiries," he said.

"So I should hope," she told him briskly. "Although I must confess, my sympathies are rather with the thief." She paused, then continued with obvious embarrassment, "I thought I should tell you, I saw Father Christmas last night."

Roberts gaped at her. For a moment he wondered if she had suddenly gone queer. "I'm sorry?" he stammered.

"Somebody dressed as Santa Claus left the parcels. I happened to look out of my window about one o'clock and I saw them going round

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behind the Renwicks' house. I didn't say anything about it, there didn't seem any point, and I've no wish to be thought mad, but if the birds were stolen—"

"You've no idea who it was?" Roberts asked, recovering a little.

"None," Miss Crindle answered firmly. "I can't even say if it was a man or a woman. I suppose you know George Townley saw them, too, two or three days ago?"

Roberts nodded. "It looks as if whoever took the turkeys was wearing red," he said grimly. "He left this caught on the hedge where he pushed through." He took out his notebook and showed Miss Crindle the fragment of cloth.

She studied it with interest. "It looks like a piece from a Santa Claus costume," she observed. She gave the policeman a shrewd look. "I suppose you think it was Colin Loates?"

This time Tom Roberts wasn't startled, he knew half the village would be supposing the same thing. "It wasn't him," he said.

"Oh?" Miss Crindle couldn't quite conceal her curiosity.

Roberts was undecided how much he should reveal. He knew the old girl had helped the police when Ralph Johns was murdered and the Chief Inspector had a high regard for her. And he could do with some help now. "The thief left footprints from the hedge across to the shed," he explained. "They were sixes or sevens, and Colin takes tens. I've seen his boots. Besides, when George Townley saw his Santa Claus, they were towing Colin's car out of a ditch along the Leobury road."

Miss Crindle hadn't known that, but she was rather glad. "Have you any idea who it may have been?" she inquired.

"No," Roberts admitted.

Miss Crindle was afraid *she* had, and after Roberts had gone she walked across the road. The Renwicks had few visitors—even the milkman called only every other day—and the footprints in the snow along the side of the cottage were still as clear as when they were made. She studied them thoughtfully, then she went to see Harriet Richards.

She didn't beat about the bush. "What do you know about Father Christmas and Jason's stolen turkeys?" she demanded.

"Me?" The girl looked surprised. "Nothing, Miss Crindle."

"Harriet," Miss Crindle told her sternly, "your eyelid's twitching. That's the second time it's done it in the last four days."

For some unaccountable reason Harriet blushed.

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"Theft is a crime," Miss Crindle continued. "It can have very serious consequences. Sometimes for the wrong person. You may disapprove of Jason but, even if you aren't having anything to do with Colin now, you wouldn't want him to get into trouble, would you?"

"No," Harriet said.

Miss Crindle nodded. "Good. What size wellingtons do you take?"

"Sevens."

"And where were you at one o'clock the night before last?"

Harriet smiled, and for the first time that morning there was a hint of her old mischief. "At Leobury," she answered. "I went to see Pat Dellar. It started to freeze hard, there was a lot of slush on the road, and I stayed the night."

Miss Crindle gazed at the girl for quite a long time. Then, "Think about it, my dear," she said.

On her way home, she met Mary Powis and Billy.

"I've seen Father Christmas," the little boy announced triumphantly.

"Billy!" his mother reproved him. "You thought you saw him on Monday, and you know he doesn't come out until Christmas Eve. And only after dark then." She smiled apologetically at Miss Crindle.

But Miss Crindle was interested. "Where did you see him, Billy?" she asked.

"By Brackett's Wood," Billy replied.

"What time was it?"

"I don't know. But it got dark soon."

"You aren't the only person who saw him," Miss Crindle said. "I saw him, too, and so did Mr. Townley." It was too much, she thought.

When she got home, she phoned Pat Dellar, who was one of her old pupils. Pat confirmed that Harriet had spent last night there.

Miss Crindle asked after her parents, they talked for a minute or two longer, and when Miss Crindle put down the phone she sat for some time, thinking. It was clear that Colin hadn't stolen the turkeys. There was only one set of footprints and he couldn't have worn size six or seven boots. Moreover, he hadn't been the Father Christmas Billy Powis and George Townley had seen. Nor could Harriet have played Santa Claus—she had been miles away when the parcels had been delivered the night before last. So who had?

After twenty minutes, Miss Crindle came to a decision. She made

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two telephone calls, then put on another cardigan and her coat and went to see Sheila Richards.

"It was all a mistake," Jason said, looking uncomfortable.

P.C. Roberts eyed him stolidly. He was quite sure it hadn't been a mistake, but if Jason was going to maintain it had, there wasn't much he could do.

"The turkeys had been put aside," Jason went on. It would have been obvious to the most obtuse listener that his heart wasn't in it. "They hadn't been stolen at all."

"I see, sir," Roberts said. He was tempted to add something about wasting police time being an offense, but decided against it. "So you don't want us to take any further action?"

"No." Jason almost writhed. Further action was what he wanted above almost everything else, but Sheila had made it all too clear that if he didn't drop the whole business she would leave him. She wasn't given to making idle threats, and Jason had believed her. For all his faults, he loved his wife.

It was Miss Crindle who was responsible. He didn't know what she had told Sheila, but whatever it was it had had a marked effect.

In fact, Miss Crindle had said quite simply that she knew who had taken the turkeys and that she hoped Jason's wife would be able to persuade him to drop the whole matter. She looked down at Sheila's feet. Sheila was nearly six feet tall, and her feet were much larger than her sister-in-law's. "It was Colin, wasn't it?" Sheila said.

Miss Crindle smiled enigmatically.

"But—" Sheila looked distraught "—Jason was sure it was Harry. He said she'd talked about the Renwicks and the Randalls and Josie Gardner a few days ago. She said he ought to give them turkeys."

"It was," Miss Crindle said.

"But it can't have been," Sheila protested. "Harry was staying with Pat the night the parcels were left."

"That wasn't her," Miss Crindle agreed.

"Then who?"

"Colin. It was Harriet's idea. She was very angry with Jason and she thought she'd teach him a lesson and help some people to have a better Christmas at the same time. She suggested it to Colin and he jumped at the idea."

"But they'd fallen out," Sheila objected. "She told me they had a terrible row. I still don't see."

"They took it in turns to cover each other," Miss Crindle told her.

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"First, while Colin was being towed out of that ditch, Harriet was making sure she was seen in her Santa Claus getup at the other end of the village. They wanted people to talk about Santa Claus being about."

"It's the sort of daft idea that would appeal to them," Sheila agreed miserably. "They've never grown up, either of them."

"We can do with a touch of youthful spirits sometimes," Miss Crindle said. "They didn't look on what they were doing as stealing."

"I tried to phone her that afternoon. Mum said she was out."

Miss Crindle nodded. "She knew Jason didn't lock the shed. She went there that night, took the four smallest turkeys, and carried them across the meadow to Colin, who was waiting in his car. She's a strong girl and it wasn't very far. Colin hid them until the next night, then, while Harriet was safe at the Dellars', he delivered them. *He* couldn't have stolen them, because the footprints in the snow were too small, and Harriet couldn't have delivered them because she was miles away. There was only one set of prints in the meadow and only one round the Renwicks'. Nobody was looking for two people working alternately."

Sheila stared at her. "Except you," she said. "Whatever made you think of it?"

"Well—" Miss Crindle hesitated, then she smiled. "First, their quarrel was a little too public. Harriet and Colin may be high-spirited, but they wouldn't want to have a real argument with half the village looking on. It was almost as if it were being staged for other people's benefit. And when I saw Harriet just afterward, she didn't seem upset at all. Then her eyelid started twitching. It did it again when she told me she didn't know anything about the turkeys. I *knew* she was involved then."

"Oh," Sheila said, understanding.

"It's always done that when she's telling fibs, ever since she was a little girl at school," Miss Crindle said. "When you're a teacher as long as I was, you don't forget things like that. Then, the footprints at the Renwicks' aren't the same size as the others—they must be tens, at least. I tackled Harriet just now, and she told me the truth."

"Oh," Sheila said again. Uneasily she added, "I wonder what Jason's going to say."

"I'm sure you can manage him," Miss Crindle told her.

Mrs. Grundy laughed. "Then I'll have to get another one," she said cheerfully. "Really, Mr. Richards, it doesn't matter at all. To

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be frank, a ten-pound turkey would have been far too big for just my husband and me. I'm sure Mrs. Gardner and her children will enjoy it much more. But I must insist you let me pay you for it."

Jason met her eye, then looked away. "No," he said gruffly. "That's all right, Mrs. Grundy, I've written those four birds off. They're a present from us. After all, it's Christmas."

Mrs. Grundy nearly fainted.

DETECTIVERSE

COLD COMFORT

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

Though a hot-headed bagman, suspected
Of skimming cash, strongly objected,
He was sent with a curse
To the morgue via hearse—
Now he's very calm, cool, and collected.

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

With Mamie Hollister in Forest Park, Devillo had gone too far, singed if not cooked his own goose, and been obliged to skip town only hours before a Federal marshal's warrant could be served on him. Arabella Tinkham's commission, including as it did the hospitality of her home during the course of his researches, couldn't have come at a better time. Though by no means a lucrative commission, bed and board in a quiet New England village was better than nothing. And who could tell? Miss Tinkham might prove "special . . ."

HIDDEN ASSETS

by DONALD OLSON

"We were never a distinguished family," admitted Miss Tinkham as they drank tea in the sitting room of the decaying old house north of Boston on the afternoon of Devillo Green's arrival. "Although you will come across in your researches one or two names not wholly without historical significance. Jane, dear, pour Mr. Green another cup of tea."

Unless she moved, for she'd uttered hardly a word, one would scarcely be aware of the niece's presence. Jane Frimble was a thirtyish, exceedingly plain-featured woman with lank, straw-colored hair, moist, rabbity grey eyes, and a manner so self-effacing as to render her virtually invisible. Elderly Miss Tinkham, on the other hand, was a commanding figure with her cloud of fine white hair and lively blue eyes.

Presently, the tea ritual ended, Miss Tinkham rose. "Let me show you where you can work." But then she paused outside the study door. "Please don't think me rude, Mr. Green, but would you mind

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waiting until I have the papers out of the safe? Nonsense, of course, but dear, fussy Mr. Broadley, my lawyer, is always scolding me for being so lax about security. I'm sure you understand."

When she admitted him, Devillo Green found a stack of papers and old documents spread out on a desk in front of a bay window overlooking a garden which appeared in as neglected a state as the house itself. Glass-fronted bookcases flanked a panelled pine fireplace. The safe Miss Tinkham had mentioned lay obviously behind the portrait over the mantel. Devillo's sharp eyes noticed that one edge of the picture hung slightly ajar from the wall.

"Jane will be happy to show you the family plots in our little cemetery." Miss Tinkham glanced at the door as if to be sure it was shut. "I do hope you'll be nice to poor Jane, Mr. Green. She needs taking out of herself. There hasn't been a man in this house for years and she seldom goes out. The dear girl's quite devoted to me and I to her. I shan't object if you choose to invite her out for a stroll some afternoon. The weather's so lovely now."

Devillo murmured that it would be his pleasure, and then was forced to listen to the endless saga of the Tinkham clan whose undeeds Miss Tinkham felt obliged to have chronicled before what she appeared to feel might be her imminent demise: she hinted at a failing heart.

As a professional genealogist, Devillo had discovered early in his career that among his clients there were those, usually the bored and the lonely, whose confidence he could sometimes profitably exploit. Having been hired to dig into their pasts, he could occasionally, if he was lucky, unearth as much about the clients as about their forbears. It was chancy, but so was digging for gold in seemingly empty desert. These "special" clients were invariably female, often eccentric, and responsive to Devillo's charm. With his gingersnap eyes, curly brown hair, and lips that were made for laughing, he had broken hearts, defrauded the unwary, and on more than one occasion employed the more devious forms of blackmail.

With Mamie Hollister in Forest Park, he had gone too far, singed if not cooked his own goose, and been obliged to skip town only hours before a Federal marshal's warrant could be served on him. Arabella Tinkham's commission, including as it did the hospitality of her home during the course of his researches, couldn't have come at a better time. Though by no means a lucrative commission, bed and board in a quiet New England village was better than nothing. And who could tell? Miss Tinkham might prove "special" . . .

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Devillo found Jane Frimble's manner somewhat less unbending in the peaceful country cemetery, as if the undemanding company of the ancient dead were more congenial to her temperament than that of the living. Wandering among the gravestones of distant Tinkhams, they came presently to be standing over the site of Arabella's eventual resting place.

Devillo ventured a personal question. "What will you do, Jane—may I call you Jane?—when Miss Tinkham is gone?"

A faint spark lit for a moment the moist grey eyes. "I don't know. I'd like to travel."

"Travel where?" He expected her to say Boston, or perhaps New York, or the seashore, for Miss Tinkham had told him Jane had never been more than twenty miles out of the village.

"Venice," she replied quietly, but with a wistful dreaminess.

"Amazing!" cried Devillo.

"It is?"

"I mean, that's the one city I myself want most to visit. The one place I feel would match my image of it."

"Oh, yes—I feel that way, too."

"Travel," he sighed, "especially overseas, is frightfully expensive now, I'm afraid. But we can dream, can't we?"

"Oh, I shall go. I won't just dream about it." She stooped to pull a few weeds from around the headstone. "She's promised I won't want for anything when she's gone."

Devillo laughed softly, amused by her naivete. "I guess that shows how misleading appearances can be. I mean, judging by the house and garden, everything seems to be in a state of decay."

"There's not much money left," she replied frankly. "Mr. Broadley's always scolding her. But she has what she calls 'hidden assets.' "

The phrase excited Devillo, whose own slim assets were badly in need of replenishing after the Forest Park disaster. "That must explain her preferring not to open the safe in front of strangers."

When Jane smiled, one could see the possibilities were she to make some effort with her appearance. "No, it's not that," she said. "She's rather vain, you see. Her memory has failed in the past few years. She hates anyone—even me—to know she can't even remember the combination of the safe. She always has to look it up."

Devillo thought it prudent to restrain his curiosity. "Well, Jane, I hope your dreams of seeing Venice come true. I say, wouldn't it be splendid if we could go there together?" He meant it as a jest and

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was astonished to see the color flooding her face. With deep earnestness, she said: "Yes, I don't suppose it would be much fun going alone." She glanced up at the sun. "It must be almost noon. We'd better get back."

"I've a better idea," said Devillo. "Why don't we have lunch in town? I noticed a quaint little tearoom sort of place near the green. What is it called—the Tally-Ho?"

A smile appeared and quickly vanished. "I must get back to make lunch for Aunt Arabella."

"Call her. Ask if it would be okay."

Miss Tinkham declared it a "jolly good idea." Though clearly pleased, Jane's smile was tinged with guilt. In the tearoom she admitted that her aunt worried about what was to become of her in the future. "Two or three times she's tried to get me interested in some young man, but I would never leave her, she knows that."

"Pity, isn't it," observed Devillo, sipping his tea, "that loyalty must so often require self-sacrifice? I suppose that's why I've never married." His melancholy, decorous smile implied a history of personal denial. But then he brightened. "Jane, I'd rather talk about Venice, wouldn't you?"

"I don't know what you've been saying to that girl," said Miss Tinkham, severity of tone belied by a mischievous twinkle. "I do believe she's quite smitten with you."

Smitten. The archaic word amused Devillo. "Hardly that. I've merely followed your instructions to be nice to Jane."

"Now that's naughty of you and most unflattering to Jane. Do you find her company tiresome?"

"I didn't mean that at all. She's—enchanting. One seldom meets a girl with the old-fashioned virtues any more."

"Oh, Jane's a very *good* girl, but she has no sparkle, I'm afraid. I'll tell you a secret, Mr. Green. Jane will be very well off when I'm gone. I don't mean this old ruin of a house. And I've never trusted *paper*—stocks and bonds and such. I fear there's just enough dwindling capital of that sort to see me through—if I don't hang on too long, as dear Mr. Broadley doesn't hesitate to warn me. He and my doctor are very kind, but unsparing. Luckily, some things hold their value despite inflation. Yes indeed, Mr. Green, when I'm gone that girl will sparkle!"

Devillo was intrigued by Miss Tinkham's indiscreet allusions to what Jane had called her "hidden assets." Alone in the study, he

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had already established the presence of the safe behind the portrait, one that would defy the skill of any but a professional box man, and he often sat contemplating the portrait and wondering where Miss Tinkham kept the combination. Meanwhile, he devoted his spare time to entertaining Jane Frimble, taking her for long walks in the golden hours of evening and for lunches at the Tally-Ho. It was over one of these lunches that he ventured to bring up the subject of the safe in the study.

"Hasn't your aunt ever given you a hint about these hidden assets you mentioned? I must say, I'd be very curious."

"Oh, no, she makes a great secret of it, even from Mr. Broadley."

"Well, I hope for your sake they really exist. Old people are prone to fantasize. I'd hate to think Venice might remain only a dream."

Jane sighed. "You were joking about us going there together, of course."

"Not at all. I've been corresponding with a lady in London about a possible commission." This was true. "From there to Venice isn't very far."

Shyly, Jane studied his face. "You've made a very favorable impression on my aunt. She trusts you."

"Maybe she's *too* trusting. Maybe you are, too. Jane, I'd be dying for a peek into that safe if I were you."

"I'd hate for her even to guess I knew where she kept the combination."

"You mean you do know?" Devillo asked—too eagerly.

"Well, in a way. I went out into the garden one warm night last summer. A light came on in the study. I saw her take a book from one of the shelves and look into it as she opened the safe. Of course I don't know which book it was—I wouldn't want to know."

Devillo looked at her closely. Could she really be this artless? With an air of cynical detachment, he said: "Meaning you might be tempted?"

"*Goodness,* no. I'd feel guilty just knowing."

"And you didn't see what she removed from the safe?"

"No. I saw she put something back. Some papers."

By this time, Devillo's research was finished and all that remained was to plot the charts and chronicle the narrative of the Tinkham forbears, none of whom could boast any claim to fame. Still, he found it hard to concentrate, his attention constantly distracted by the rows of books behind diamond-paned doors. As Miss Tinkham or

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Jane often popped into the study unexpectedly, he hadn't dared risk being caught in the act of methodically checking each volume for a telltale slip of paper, and only when he felt it safe to do so would he snatch the occasional few seconds to examine a book or two at a time, starting with the shelves on the left of the fireplace.

Several days passed without producing any result before it occurred to him that Miss Tinkham might have been more cunning than he'd given her credit for. Might the combination be disguised as one of the dates inscribed on a flyleaf? Several of the books bore such inscriptions. However, it soon became apparent that all such inscriptions had been written before the turn of the century. The safe wasn't that old.

And then quite by chance, as he came to the last few volumes on the lowest shelf, Devillo made an exciting discovery. Tucked inside the cover of Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds*, he found a much smaller book, softbound, little more than a pamphlet wrapped in a plain brown dustjacket that might have been cut from an old grocery bag. He might easily have overlooked the short series of letters and numbers lightly penciled on the back of this crude jacket, had caught only a hasty glimpse when he heard footsteps in the hall. In a flash the little book disappeared into his jacket pocket, *The Eustace Diamonds* was shoved back in place, and he was at the desk when Miss Tinkham opened the door.

"Mr. Green, why don't you leave off for now and take Jane for a walk before the rain starts? She does so enjoy your little excursions. Come along now, you can post some letters for me while you're out."

Alone in his room that night, Devillo examined his discovery, wondering if it was more than a coincidence, the lady not being without a sense of humor, that Miss Tinkham had kept that pamphlet inside *The Eustace Diamonds*. He recalled the remark she'd made about Jane: "Yes indeed, when I'm gone that girl will sparkle!"

The series of letters and numbers *had* to be the combination, of that Devillo felt no doubt at all, and it made sense that Miss Tinkham should have jotted it on the most inconspicuous book on the shelves, poetry with not even an author's name attached. The name at the bottom of the cover did, however, seem to ring a bell. *Printed by Calvin Thomas, 1827*. Wasn't there a Thomas somewhere in the family tree, and hadn't Miss Tinkham mentioned a printer among her forbears? Family memento?

Impatient for the early hours of the night to pass, Devillo waited

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until he heard the grandfather clock on the landing chime the hour of two before slipping the book into his robe pocket and quietly stealing down the stairs. First order of business was to make sure he was right about the combination and, if so, to identify those "hidden assets." He had a strong hunch that they'd be in the form of jewelry—heirloom pieces, most likely diamonds. Later, depending on what he found, he would turn his mind to devising a way of appropriating those assets without casting suspicion on himself. Fake a burglary, perhaps? Never before in his career had he stooped to outright theft, but times were bad, one couldn't be squeamish.

The house itself seemed asleep as he paused outside the study door, leaving it slightly ajar as he stole into the room. Fumbling to switch on one of the mantel lamps, his hand disturbed the delicate crystal prisms, their soft tinkle sounding overloud in the silence. He paused once more, then dislodged the portrait to reveal the safe. He rubbed his sweating palms on his thighs before drawing the little book from his pocket and holding it up to read the numbers. A moment later, the safe clicked open.

In his excitement, Devillo failed to hear the faint creak of the study door. "Ah, you wretch! You wretch! It's *you* I heard!"

In a long white nightgown, with her white hair undone, eyes ablaze in a dead-white face, she might have been a ghostly apparition in the mantel lamp's pale glow. It was no ghost, however, who raised the gold-headed cane and flung herself toward Devillo. His one hand still raised to the safe's dial, the other clutching the little book, he felt powerless to move or speak.

"You *give* me that!" Miss Tinkham cried hoarsely, reaching out with her free hand to snatch the book from his grasp. Only when he'd released the book and saw the cane descending upon his head did Devillo come alive, throwing up his hand to ward off the blow. Needlessly, as it happened, for the cane fell out of her hand as Miss Tinkham uttered a gasping cry of pain and crumpled to the floor.

In the ensuing awful silence, Devillo gazed down upon the lifeless figure, suppressed his first wild impulse to flee from the room, and swiftly returned his attention to the safe. Recklessly pulling out bundles of letters, old deeds, birth and death certificates, he groped for the touch of something harder, something that would sparkle in the light.

Nothing! No cash, no coins, no jewelry—nothing of value! Angrily, he thrust everything back into the safe, pushed it shut, and was in the act of turning when—

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"Devillo!"

He took a step forward as Jane rushed into the room.

"Devillo, what's happened?" Then a piping cry broke from her lips at the sight of the crumpled form at her feet.

Devillo put his arms around her as she would have fallen upon the old lady's body. "I heard her cry out as I was coming from the bathroom," he said. "Jane, what was she *doing* down here at this hour?"

"Is she—is she—?"

"I'm sorry. Yes." This wasn't the first time he'd looked into the unmistakable face of death. "This is how I found her. But *why*, Jane? Do you suppose she imagined she heard someone down here?"

Jane trembled in his arms. "I thought I heard something, but I wasn't sure. Then I thought I'd better come down. Look—the little book in her hand! She must have come down to check the safe and then her heart—oh, Devillo, how terrible!"

Lucky for him, thought Devillo, the old crone died with the book clutched in her hand. Bitterness, however, outweighed relief. So much for his shot at the big score. So much for Jane Frimble's dreams of Venice. They'd both been cheated.

He was in New York, killing time in a seedy West Side hotel while hoping for a check to arrive from an old, somewhat dotty benefactress who continued to believe his promises, a check that would cover the cost of a flight to London where a possible commission awaited him. Either way, he no longer felt safe on this side of the Atlantic. Sooner or later that marshal's warrant would catch up with him—or one of Mamie Hollister's private detectives. Vindictive bitch.

He had lunched at a Nedick's and was strolling in a light rain past the Hilton when a woman walked by and turned to enter the hotel. Their eyes met, but until she smiled Devillo didn't recognize her. "*Jane?*"

"Devillo! What a coincidence! What are you doing in New York?"

Could this really be *Jane?* His eyes swept over the fashionably tailored suit, the softly waved hair, the discreet makeup. Even under the cloudy wet sky she—yes, she sparkled!

"I'm flying to London in a few days," he boasted.

"How thrilling. Oh, let's duck in out of the rain."

In the lobby, Devillo continued to gawk at her as if she must be playing some trick on his senses. "Jane, you look terrific. What are you doing here?"

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She checked her watch. "I'm meeting my young man here for lunch." She blushed becomingly. "I met him in Boston about a month after Aunt Arabella died."

Wonder of wonders. "That's great. I'm happy for you, Jane. But I meant what are you doing in New York?"

"Tom and I have an appointment at Parke-Bernet this afternoon. About the book." And then, seeing his baffled look: "Oh, but you don't *know*. Leaving in such a rush like you did. That little book, the one Aunt Arabella had in her hand when she died, believe it or not *that* was my legacy."

"You mean it was worth something?" She must be joking. That *pamphlet?*

"Rather, yes," she admitted modestly.

"Then why didn't she keep it in the safe? Or did she?" he quickly added.

Jane laughed. "You know what she was like, so sly in her way. And she was a great admirer of Poe. You know, the *Purloined Letter* theory? Hiding something in plain sight? Anyway, the lawyer had a sealed letter explaining it all. The book had come down in the family from an ancestor who was a printer. There were only about fifty copies printed and until Aunt Arabella's came to light only four authenticated copies known to be in existence. But *she* knew. She'd known for years and kept the secret."

It all sounded a bit fishy to Devillo. He was about to remark that the little book hadn't even an author's name on the cover, only *By a Bostonian*, but again caught himself in time.

"How valuable is it?" he inquired lightly.

"*Very* valuable, it seems! We've been told it's the most valuable book ever printed in America. *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. By Edgar Allan Poe. They expect it might bring close to half a million at auction."

Devillo's mouth sagged open. My God, he thought, I had it in my hands. *I had it in my pocket!* The extent of his ignorance and the magnitude of his loss overwhelmed him. His ashen face alarmed Jane. She put a hand on his arm. "Devillo? Are you all right? Tom should be here any minute. You must have a drink with us to celebrate. We'll have champagne."

Much as he could have used a restorative, Devillo said no, he wouldn't have time. The last thing he needed was sparkling champagne.

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1990 EQMM READERS AWARD

1990 is the sixth year of the EQMM Readers Award, and a gratifying award it has come to be, the winning stories you have chosen for the years 1985–1989 and their runners-up are of the highest quality and appeal. We hope you will vote in greater numbers this year and that you will look back through all 157 titles published during the course of the year to be sure you're not overlooking a story of special merit.

This year we're trying a slightly different approach. Our ballot includes room for a second and a third choice. You may not want to vote for three stories, just one or two, but you do have that choice—and the point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received. Stories that are voted your first choice will receive three points, stories voted second will receive two points, and those voted third will receive one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will win the 1990 EQMM Readers Award, of course, with the first and second runners-up receiving the second and third highest vote.

Your ballot is on page 96. If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address on page 96 postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline. Many thanks.

"Q"

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The 1990 EQMM Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 1991 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers and newsstands, send a standard-size envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot, if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 1990 EQMM Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

Mail to: The Editors
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
380 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10017

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a distinguished reprint by

GEORGES SIMENON

When this novelet first appeared in the January 1952 issue of EQMM, Ellery Queen quoted comments from W. R. Burnett (Little Caesar, High Sierra, The Asphalt Jungle): *"To me, Simenon is not only the best writer of detective stories living, he is also one of the finest novelists. There are plenty of novelists with large reputations who are not even in the same class with Simenon. Reviewers are prejudiced against him because of his subject matter. I don't need to tell you, literary bias and literary snobbery have built many false reputations. Simenon's later work deals almost exclusively with crime and is unsurpassed. To be quite frank, I often sweat blood when I read him, wondering how on earth he gets such wonderful results with such apparent ease and economy of means. If he isn't a first-class novelist, then I know nothing whatever about writing and should go back to the farm."*

Well, we know very well how much Mr. Burnett knew about writing and the evidence is now well in on the brilliance of Mr. Simenon's star in the literary firmament. That the work of both men translated so well to the screen is indicative of their strength as novelists who knew their characters and how to handle suspense . . .

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

by GEORGES SIMENON

"At home we always used to go to Midnight Mass. I can't remember a Christmas when we missed it, though it meant a good half hour's drive from the farm to the village."

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The speaker, Sommer, was making some coffee on a little electric stove.

"There were five of us," he went on. "Five boys, that is. The winters were colder in those days. Sometimes we had to go by sledge."

Lecœur, on the switchboard, had taken off his earphones to listen. "In what part of the country was that?"

"Lorraine."

"The winters in Lorraine were no colder thirty or forty years ago than they are now—only, of course, in those days the peasant had no cars. How many times did you go to Midnight Mass by sledge?"

"Couldn't say, exactly."

"Three times? Twice? Perhaps no more than once. Only it made a great impression on you, as you were a child."

"Anyhow, when we got back, we'd all have black pudding, and I'm not exaggerating when I tell you I've never had anything like it since. I don't know what my mother used to put in them, but her *boudins* were quite different from anyone else's. My wife's tried, but it wasn't the same thing, though she had the exact recipe from my eldest sister—at least, my sister swore it was."

He walked over to one of the huge, uncurtained windows, through which was nothing but blackness, and scratched the pane with a fingernail.

"Hallo, there's frost forming. That again reminds me of when I was little. The water used to freeze in our rooms and we'd have to break the ice in the morning when we wanted to wash."

"People didn't have central heating in those days," answered Lecœur coolly.

There were three of them on night duty. *Les nuiteux*, they were called. They had been in that vast room since eleven o'clock, and now, at six on that Christmas morning, all three were looking a bit jaded. Three or four empty bottles were lying about, with the remains of the sandwiches they had brought with them.

A lamp no bigger than an aspirin tablet lit up on one of the walls. Its position told Lecœur at once where the call came from.

"Thirteenth Arrondissement, Croulebarbe," he murmured, replacing his earphones. He seized a plug and pushed it into a hole.

"Croulebarbe? Your car's been called out—what for?"

"A call from the Boulevard Masséna. Two drunks fighting."

Lecœur carefully made a little cross in one of the columns of his notebook.

"How are you getting on down your way?"

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"There are only four of us here. Two are playing dominoes."

"Had any *boudin* tonight?"

"No. Why?"

"Never mind. I must ring off now. There's a call from the Sixteenth."

A gigantic map of Paris was drawn on the wall in front of him, and on it each police station was represented by a little lamp. As soon as anything happened anywhere, a lamp would light up and Lecœur would plug into the appropriate socket.

"Chaillot? Hallo! Your car's out?"

In front of each police station throughout the twenty arrondissements of Paris, one or more cars stood waiting, ready to dash off the moment an alarm was raised.

"What with?"

"Veronal."

That would be a woman. It was the third suicide that night, the second in the smart district of Passy.

Another little cross was entered in the appropriate column of Lecœur's notebook. Mambret, the third member of the watch, was sitting at a desk filling out forms.

"Hallo! Odéon? What's going on? Oh, a car stolen."

That was for Mambret, who took down the particulars, then phoned them through to Piedbœuf in the room above. Piedbœuf, the teleprinter operator, had such a resounding voice that the others could hear it through the ceiling. This was the forty-eighth car whose details he had circulated that night.

An ordinary night, in fact—for them. Not so for the world outside. For this was the great night, *la nuit de Noël*. Not only was there the Midnight Mass, but all the theaters and cinemas were crammed, and at the big stores, which stayed open till twelve, a crowd of people jostled each other in a last-minute scramble to finish off their Christmas shopping.

Indoors were family gatherings feasting on roast turkey and perhaps also on *boudins* made, like the ones Sommer had been talking about, from a secret recipe handed down from mother to daughter.

There were children sleeping restlessly while their parents crept about playing the part of Santa Claus, arranging the presents they would find on waking.

At the restaurants and cabarets every table had been booked at least a week in advance. In the Salvation Army barge on the Seine, tramps and paupers queued up for an extra special.

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Sommer had a wife and five children. Piedbœuf, the teleprinter operator upstairs, was a father of one week's standing. Without the frost on the windowpanes, they wouldn't have known it was freezing outside. In that vast, dingy room they were in a world apart, surrounded on all sides by the empty offices of the Préfecture de Police, which stood facing the Palais de Justice. It wasn't till the following day that those offices would once again be teeming with people in search of passport visas, driving licenses, and permits of every description.

In the courtyard below, cars stood waiting for emergency calls, the men of the flying squad dozing on the seats. Nothing, however, had happened that night of sufficient importance to justify their being called out. You could see that from the little crosses in Lecœur's notebook. He didn't bother to count them, but he could tell at a glance that there were something like two hundred in the drunks' column.

No doubt there'd have been a lot more if it hadn't been that this was a night for indulgence. In most cases the police were able to persuade those who had had too much to go home and keep out of trouble. Those arrested were the ones in whom drink raised the devil, those who smashed windows or molested other people.

Two hundred of that sort—a handful of women among them—were now out of harm's way, sleeping heavily on the wooden benches in the lockups.

There'd been five knifings. Two near the Porte d'Italie. Three in the remoter part of Montmartre, not in the Montmartre of the Moulin Rouge and the Lapin Agile but in the Zone, beyond where the Fortifs used to be, whose population included over 100,000 Arabs living in huts made of old packing cases and roofing-felt.

A few children had been lost in the exodus from the churches, but they were soon returned to their anxious parents.

"Hallo! Chaillot? How's your veronal case getting on?"

She wasn't dead. Of course not! Few went as far as that. Suicide is all very well as a gesture—indeed, it can be a very effective one. But there's no need to go and kill yourself!

"Talking of *boudin*," said Mambret, who was smoking an enormous meerschaum pipe, "that reminds me of—"

They were never to know what he was reminded of. There were steps in the corridor, then the handle of the door was turned. All three looked round at once, wondering who could be coming to see them at ten past six in the morning.

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"*Salut!*" said the man who entered, throwing his hat down on a chair.

"Whatever brings you here, Janvier?"

It was a detective of the Brigade des Homicides, who walked straight to the stove to warm his hands.

"I got pretty bored sitting all by myself and I thought I might as well come over here. After all, if the killer's going to do his stuff I'd hear about it quicker here than anywhere."

He, too, had been on duty all night, but round the corner, in the Police Judiciaire.

"You don't mind, do you?" he asked, picking up the coffeepot. "There's a bitter wind blowing."

It had made his ears red.

"I don't suppose we'll hear till eight, probably later," said Lecœur.

For the last fifteen years, he had spent his nights in that room, sitting at the switchboard, keeping an eye on the big map with the little lamps. He knew half the police in Paris by name, or, at any rate, those who did night duty. Of many he knew even their private affairs, as, when things were quiet, he would have long chats with them over the telephone to pass the time away. "Oh, it's you, Dumas. How are things at home?"

But though there were many whose voices were familiar, there were hardly any of them he knew by sight.

Nor was his acquaintance confined to the police. He was on equally familiar terms with many of the hospitals.

"Hallo! Bichat? What about the chap who was brought in half an hour ago? Is he dead yet?"

He was dead, and another little cross went into the notebook. The latter was, in its unpretentious way, quite a mine of information. If you asked Lecœur how many murders in the last twelve months had been done for the sake of money, he'd give the answer in a moment—sixty-seven.

"How many murders committed by foreigners?"

"Forty-two."

You could go on like that for hours without being able to trip him up. And yet he trotted out his figures without a trace of swank. It was his hobby, that was all.

For he wasn't obliged to make those crosses. It was his own idea. Like the chats over the telephone lines, they helped to pass the time away, and the result gave him much the same satisfaction that others derive from a collection of stamps.

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He was unmarried. Few knew where he lived or what sort of a life he led outside that room. It was difficult to picture him anywhere else, even to think of him walking along the street like an ordinary person. He turned to Janvier to say: "For your cases, we generally have to wait till people are up and about. It's when a concierge goes up with the post or when a maid takes her mistress's breakfast into the bedroom that things like that come to light."

He claimed no special merit in knowing a thing like that. It was just a fact. A bit earlier in summer, of course, and later in winter. On Christmas Day probably later still, as a considerable part of the population hadn't gotten to bed until two or even later, to say nothing of their having to sleep off a good many glasses of champagne.

Before then, still more water would have gone under the bridge—a few more stolen cars, a few belated drunks.

"Hallo! Saint-Gervais?"

His Paris was not the one known to the rest of us—the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Opéra—but one of somber, massive buildings, with a police car waiting under the blue lamp and the bicycles of the *agents cyclistes* leaning against the wall.

"The chief is convinced the chap'll have another go tonight," said Janvier. "It's just the night for people of that sort. Seems to excite them."

No name was mentioned, for none was known. Nor could he be described as the man in the fawn raincoat or the man in the grey hat, since no one had ever seen him. For a while the papers had referred to him as Monsieur Dimanche, as his first three murders had been on Sunday, but since then five others had been on weekdays, at the rate of about one a week, though not quite regularly.

"It's because of him you've been on all night, is it?" asked Mambret.

Janvier wasn't the only one. All over Paris extra men were on duty, watching or waiting.

"You'll see," put in Sommer, "when you do get him you'll find he's only a loony."

"Loony or not, he's killed eight people," sighed Janvier, sipping his coffee. "Look, Lecœur—there's one of your lamps burning."

"Hallo! Your car's out? What's that? Just a moment."

They could see Lecœur hesitate, not knowing in which column to put a cross. There was one for hangings, one for those who jumped out of the window, another for—

"Here, listen to this. On the Pont d'Austerlitz, a chap climbed up

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onto the parapet. He had his legs tied together and a cord round his neck with the end made fast to a lamppost, and as he threw himself over he fired a shot into his head!"

"Taking no risks, what? And which column does that one go into?"

"There's one for neurasthenics. We may as well call it that."

Those who hadn't been to Midnight Mass were now on their way to early service. With hands thrust deep in their pockets and drops on the ends of their noses, they walked bent forward into the cutting wind, which seemed to blow up a fine, icy dust from the pavements. It would soon be time for the children to be waking up, jumping out of bed, and gathering barefoot around lighted Christmas trees.

"But it's not at all sure the fellow's mad. In fact, the experts say that if he was he'd always do it the same way. If it was a knife, then it would always be a knife."

"What did he use this time?"

"A hammer."

"And the time before?"

"A dagger."

"What makes you think it's the same chap?"

"First of all, the fact that there've been eight murders in quick succession. You don't get eight new murderers cropping up in Paris all at once." Belonging to the Police Judiciaire, Janvier had, of course, heard the subject discussed at length. "Besides, there's a sort of family likeness between them all. The victims are invariably solitary people, people who live alone, without any family or friends."

Sommer looked at Lecœur, whom he could never forgive for not being a family man. Not only had he five children himself, but a sixth was already on the way. "You'd better look out, Lecœur—you see the kind of thing it leads to!"

"Then, not one of the crimes has been committed in one of the wealthier districts."

"Yet he steals, doesn't he?"

"He does, but not much. The little hoards hidden under the mattress—that's his mark. He doesn't break in. In fact, apart from the murder and the money missing, he leaves no trace at all."

Another lamp burning. A stolen car found abandoned in a little side street near the Place des Ternes.

"All the same, I can't help laughing over the people who had to walk home."

Another hour or more and they would be relieved, except Lecœur,

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who had promised to do the first day shift as well so that his opposite number could join in a family Christmas party somewhere near Rouen.

It was a thing he often did, so much so that he had come to be regarded as an ever-ready substitute for anybody who wanted a day off.

"I say, Lecœur, do you think you could look out for me on Friday?"

At first the request was proffered with a suitable excuse—a sick mother, a funeral, or a First Communion, and he was generally rewarded with a bottle of wine. But now it was taken for granted and treated quite casually.

To tell the truth, had it been possible, Lecœur would have been only too glad to spend his whole life in that room, snatching a few hours' sleep on a camp bed and picnicking as best he could with the aid of the little electric stove. It was a funny thing—although he was as careful as any of the others about his personal appearance, and much more so than Sommer, who always looked a bit tousled, there was something a bit drab about him which betrayed the bachelor.

He wore strong glasses, which gave him big, globular eyes, and it came as a surprise to everyone when he took them off to wipe them with the bit of chamois leather he always carried about to see the transformation. Without them, his eyes were gentle, rather shy, and inclined to look away quickly when anyone looked his way.

"Hallo! Javel?"

Another lamp. One near the Quai de Javel in the 15th Arrondissement, a district full of factories.

"*Votre car est sorti?*"

"We don't know yet what it is. Someone's broken the glass of the alarm in the Rue Leblanc."

"Wasn't there a message?"

"No. We've sent our car to investigate. I'll ring you again later."

Scattered here and there all over Paris are red-painted telephone pillars standing by the curb, and you have only to break the glass to be in direct telephone communication with the nearest police station. Had a passerby broken the glass accidentally? It looked like it, for a couple of minutes later Javel rang up again.

"Hallo! Central? Our car's just got back. Nobody about. The whole district seems quiet as the grave. All the same, we've sent out a patrol."

How was Lecœur to classify that one? Unwilling to admit defeat,

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he put a little cross in the column on the extreme right headed "Miscellaneous."

"Is there any coffee left?" he asked.

"I'll make some more."

The same lamp lit up again, barely ten minutes after the first call.

"Javel? What's it this time?"

"Same again. Another glass broken."

"Nothing said?"

"Not a word. Must be some practical joker. Thinks it funny to keep us on the hop. When we catch him he'll find out whether it's funny or not!"

"Which one was it?"

"The one on the Pont Mirabeau."

"Seems to walk pretty quickly, your practical joker!"

There was indeed quite a good stretch between the two pillars.

So far, nobody was taking it very seriously. False alarms were not uncommon. Some people took advantage of these handy instruments to express their feelings about the police. "*Mort aux flics!*" was the favorite phrase.

With his feet on a radiator, Janvier was just dozing off when he heard Lecœur telephoning again. He half opened his eyes, saw which lamp was on, and muttered sleepily, "There he is again."

He was right. A glass broken at the top of the Avenue de Versailles.

"Silly ass," he grunted, settling down again.

It wouldn't be really light until half past seven or even eight. Sometimes they could hear a vague sound of church bells, but that was in another world. The wretched men of the flying squad waiting in the cars below must be half frozen.

"Talking of *boudin*—"

"What *boudin?*" murmured Janvier, whose cheeks were flushed with sleep.

"The one my mother used to—"

"Hallo! What? You're not going to tell me someone's smashed the glass of one of your telephone pillars? Really? It must be the same chap. We've already had two reported from the Fifteenth. Yes, they tried to nab him but couldn't find a soul about. Gets about pretty fast, doesn't he? He crossed the river by the Pont Mirabeau. Seems to be heading in this direction. Yes, you may as well have a try."

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Another little cross. By half past seven, with only half an hour of the night watch to go, there were five crosses in the Miscellaneous column.

Mad or sane, the person was a good walker. Perhaps the cold wind had something to do with it. It wasn't the weather for sauntering along.

For a time it had looked as though he was keeping to the right bank of the Seine, then he had sheered off into the wealthy Auteuil district, breaking a glass in the Rue la Fontaine.

"He's only five minutes' walk from the Bois de Boulogne," Lecœur had said. "If he once gets there, they'll never pick him up."

But the fellow had turned round and made for the quays again, breaking a glass in the Rue Berton, just around the corner from the Quai de Passy.

The first calls had come from the poorer quarters of Grenelle, but the man had only to cross the river to find himself in entirely different surroundings—quiet, spacious, and deserted streets, where his footfalls must have rung out clearly on the frosty pavements.

Sixth call. Skirting the Place du Trocadéro, he was in the Rue de Longchamp.

"The chap seems to think he's on a paper chase," remarked Mambret. "Only he uses broken glass instead of paper."

Other calls came in in quick succession. Another stolen car, a revolver-shot in the Rue de Flandres, whose victim swore he didn't know who fired it, though he'd been seen all through the night drinking in company with another man.

"Hallo! Here's Javel again. Hallo! Javel? It can't be your practical joker this time: he must be somewhere near the Champs Elysées by now. Oh, yes. He's still at it. Well, what's your trouble? What? Spell it, will you? Rue Michat. Yes, I've got it. Between the Rue Lecourbe and the Boulevard Felix Faure. By the viaduct—yes, I know. Number 17. Who reported it? The concierge? She's just been up, I suppose. Oh, shut up, will you! No, I wasn't speaking to you. It's Sommer here, who can't stop talking about a *boudin* he ate thirty years ago!"

Sommer broke off and listened to the man on the switchboard.

"What were you saying? A shabby seven-story block of flats. Yes—"

There were plenty of buildings like that in the district, buildings that weren't really old, but of such poor construction that they were already dilapidated. Buildings that as often as not thrust themselves up bleakly in the middle of a bit of wasteland, towering over the

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little shacks and hovels around them, their blind walls plastered with advertisements.

"You say she heard someone running downstairs and then a door slam. The door of the house, I suppose. On which floor is the flat? The *entresol*. Which way does it face? Onto an inner courtyard—Just a moment, there's a call coming in from the Eighth. That must be our friend of the telephone pillars."

Lecœur asked the new caller to wait, then came back to Javel.

"An old woman, you say. Madame Fayet. Worked as charwoman. Dead? A blunt instrument. Is the doctor there? You're sure she's dead? What about her money? I suppose she had some tucked away somewhere. Right. Call me back. Or I'll ring you."

He turned to the detective, who was now sleeping soundly.

"Janvier! Hey, Janvier! This is for you."

"What? What is it?"

"The killer."

"Where?"

"Near the Rue Lecourbe. Here's the address. This time he's done in an old charwoman, a Madame Fayet."

Janvier put on his overcoat, looked round for his hat, and gulped down the remains of the coffee in his cup.

"Who's dealing with it?"

"Gonesse, of the Fifteenth."

"Ring up the P.J., will you, and tell them I've gone there."

A minute or two later, Lecœur was able to add another little cross to the six that were already in the column. Someone had smashed the glass of the pillar in the Avenue d'Iéna only one hundred and fifty yards from the Arc de Triomphe.

"Among the broken glass they found a handkerchief flecked with blood. It was a child's handkerchief."

"Has it got initials?"

"No. It's a blue-check handkerchief, rather dirty. The chap must have wrapped it round his knuckles for breaking the glass."

There were steps in the corridor. The day shift coming to take over. They looked very clean and close-shaven and the cold wind had whipped the blood into their cheeks.

"Happy Christmas!"

Sommer closed the tin in which he brought his sandwiches. Mambret knocked out his pipe. Only Lecœur remained in his seat, since there was no relief for him.

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The fat Godin had been the first to arrive, promptly changing his jacket for the grey-linen coat in which he always worked, then putting some water on to boil for his grog. All through the winter he suffered from one never-ending cold which he combated, or perhaps nourished, by one hot grog after another.

"Hallo! Yes, I'm still here. I'm doing a shift for Potier, who's gone down to his family in Normandy. Yes. I want to hear all about it. Most particularly. Janvier's gone, but I'll pass it on to the P.J. An invalid, you say? What invalid?"

One had to be patient on that job, as people always talked about their cases as though everyone else was in the picture.

"A low building behind, right. Not in the Rue Michat, then? Rue Vasco de Gama. Yes, yes. I know. The little house with a garden behind some railings. Only I didn't know he was an invalid. Right. He doesn't sleep much. Saw a young boy climbing up a drainpipe? How old? He couldn't say? Of course not, in the dark. How did he know it was a boy, then? Listen, ring me up again, will you? Oh, you're going off. Who's relieving you? Jules? Right. Well, ask him to keep me informed."

"What's going on?" asked Godin.

"An old woman who's been done in. Down by the Rue Lecourbe."

"Who did it?"

"There's an invalid opposite who says he saw a small boy climbing up a drainpipe and along the top of a wall."

"You mean to say it was a boy who killed the old woman?"

"We don't know yet."

No one was very interested. After all, murders were an everyday matter to these people. The lights were still on in the room, as it was still only a bleak, dull daylight that found its way through the frosty window panes. One of the new watch went and scratched a bit of the frost away. It was instinctive. A childish memory perhaps, like Sommer's *boudin*.

The latter had gone home. So had Mambret. The newcomers settled down to their work, turning over the papers on their desks.

A car stolen from the Square la Bruyère.

Lecœur looked pensively at his seven crosses. Then, with a sigh, he got up and stood gazing at the immense street plan on the wall.

"Brushing up on your Paris?"

"I think I know it pretty well already. Something's just struck me. There's a chap wandering about smashing the glass of telephone

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pillars. Seven in the last hour and a half. He hasn't been going in a straight line but zigzagging—first this way, then that."

"Perhaps he doesn't know Paris."

"Or knows it only too well! Not once has he ventured within sight of a police station. If he'd gone straight, he'd have passed two or three. What's more, he's skirted all the main crossroads where there'd be likely to be a man on duty." Lecœur pointed them out. "The only risk he took was in crossing the Pont Mirabeau, but if he wanted to cross the river he'd have run that risk at any of the bridges."

"I expect he's drunk," said Godin, sipping his rum.

"What I want to know is why he's stopped."

"Perhaps he's got home."

"A man who's down by the Quai de Javel at half past six in the morning isn't likely to live near the Etoile."

"Seems to interest you a lot."

"It's got me scared!"

"Go on."

It was strange to see the worried expression on Lecœur's face. He was notorious for his calmness and his most dramatic nights were coolly summarized by the little crosses in his notebook.

"Hallo! Javel? Is that Jules? Lecœur speaking. Look here, Jules, behind the flats in the Rue Michat is the little house where the invalid lives. Well, now, on one side of it is an apartment house, a red-brick building with a grocer's shop on the ground floor. You know it?

"Good. Has anything happened there? Nothing reported. No, we've heard nothing here. All the same, I can't explain why, but I think you ought to inquire."

He was hot all at once. He stubbed out a half finished cigarette.

"Hallo! Ternes? Any alarms gone off in your neighborhood? Nothing? Only drunks? Is the *patrouille cycliste* out? Just leaving? Ask them to keep their eyes open for a young boy looking tired and very likely bleeding from the right hand. Lost? Not exactly that. I can't explain now."

His eyes went back to the street plan on the wall, in which no light went on for a good ten minutes, and then only for an accidental death in the Eighteenth Arrondissement, right up at the top of Montmartre, caused by an escape of gas.

Outside, in the cold streets of Paris, dark figures were hurrying home from the churches . . .

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One of the sharpest impressions Andre Lecœur retained of his infancy was one of immobility. His world at that period was a large kitchen in Orleans, on the outskirts of the town. He must have spent his winters there, too, but he remembered it best flooded with sunlight, with the door wide open onto a little garden where hens clucked incessantly and rabbits nibbled lettuce leaves behind the wire netting of their hutches. But, if the door was open, its passage was barred to him by a little gate which his father had made one Sunday for that express purpose.

On weekdays, at half past eight, his father went off on his bicycle to the gas works at the other end of the town. His mother did the housework, doing the same things in the same order every day. Before making the beds, she put the bedclothes over the windowsill for an hour to air.

At ten o'clock, a little bell would ring in the street. That was the greengrocer, with his barrow, passing on his daily round. Twice a week at eleven, a bearded doctor came to see his little brother, who was constantly ill. Andre hardly ever saw the latter, as he wasn't allowed into his room.

That was all, or so it seemed in retrospect. He had just time to play a bit and drink his milk, and there was his father home again for the midday meal.

If nothing had happened at home, lots had happened to him. He had been to read the meters in any number of houses and chatted with all sorts of people, about whom he would talk during dinner.

As for the afternoon, it slipped away quicker still, perhaps because he was made to sleep during the first part of it.

For his mother, apparently, the time passed just as quickly. Often had he heard her say with a sigh: "There, I've no sooner washed up after one meal than it's time to start making another!"

Perhaps it wasn't so very different now. Here in the Préfecture de Police the nights seemed long enough at the time, but at the end they seemed to have slipped by in no time, with nothing to show for them except for these columns of the little crosses in his notebook.

A few more lamps lit up. A few more incidents reported, including a collision between a car and a bus in the Rue de Clignancourt, and then once again it was Javel on the line.

It wasn't Jules, however, but Gonesse, the detective who'd been to the scene of the crime. While there he had received Lecœur's message suggesting something might have happened in the other house in the Rue Vasco de Gama. He had been to see.

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"Is that you, Lecœur?" There was a queer note in his voice. Either irritation or suspicion.

"Look here, what made you think of that house? Do you know the old woman, Madame Fayet?"

"I've never seen her, but I know all about her."

What had finally come to pass that Christmas morning was something that Andre Lecœur had foreseen and perhaps dreaded for more than ten years. Again and again, as he stared at the huge plan of Paris, with its little lamps, he had said to himself, "It's only a question of time. Sooner or later, it'll be something that's happened to someone I know."

There'd been many a near miss, an accident in his own street or a crime in a house nearby. But, like thunder, it had approached only to recede once again into the distance.

This time it was a direct hit.

"Have you seen the concierge?" he asked. He could imagine the puzzled look on the detective's face as he went on: "Is the boy at home?"

And Gonesse muttered, "Oh? So you know him, too?"

"He's my nephew. Weren't you told his name was Lecœur?"

"Yes, but—"

"Never mind about that. Tell me what's happened."

"The boy's not there."

"What about his father?"

"He got home just after seven."

"As usual. He does night work, too."

"The concierge heard him go up to his flat—on the third floor at the back of the house."

"I know it."

"He came running down a minute or two later in a great state. To use her expression, he seemed out of his wits."

"The boy had disappeared?"

"Yes. His father wanted to know if she'd seen him leave the house. She hadn't. Then he asked if a telegram had been delivered."

"Was there a telegram?"

"No. Can you make head or tail of it? Since you're one of the family, you might be able to help us. Could you get someone to relieve you and come round here?"

"It wouldn't do any good. Where's Janvier?"

"In the old woman's room. The men of the Identité Judiciaire have already got to work. The first thing they found were some child's

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fingerprints on the handle of the door. Come on—jump into a taxi and come round."

"No. In any case, there's no one to take my place."

That was true enough up to a point. All the same, if he'd really got to work on the telephone he'd have found someone all right. The truth was he didn't want to go and didn't think it would do any good if he did.

"Listen, Gonesse, I've got to find that boy, and I can do it better from here than anywhere. You understand, don't you? Tell Janvier I'm staying here. And tell him old Madame Fayet had plenty of money, probably hidden away somewhere in the room."

A little feverish, Lecœur stuck his plug into one socket after another, calling up the various police stations of the Eighth Arrondissement.

"Keep a lookout for a boy of ten, rather poorly dressed. Keep all telephone pillars under observation."

His two fellow-watchkeepers looked at him with curiosity.

"Do you think it was the boy who did the job?"

Lecœur didn't bother to answer. The next moment he was through to the teleprinter room, where they also dealt with radio messages.

"Justin? Oh, you're on, are you? Here's something special. Will you send out a call to all cars on patrol anywhere near the Etoile to keep a lookout for—"

Once again the description of the boy, Francois Lecœur.

"No. I've no idea in which direction he'll be making. All I can tell you is that he seems to keep well clear of police stations, and as far as possible from any place where there's likely to be anyone on traffic duty."

He knew his brother's flat in the Rue Vasco de Gama. Two rather dark rooms and a tiny kitchen. The boy slept there alone while his father was at work. From the windows you could see the back of the house in the Rue Michat, across a courtyard generally hung with washing. On some of the windowsills were pots of geraniums, and through the windows, many of which were uncurtained, you could catch glimpses of a miscellaneous assortment of humanity.

As a matter of fact, there, too, the windowpanes ought to be covered with frost. He stored that idea up in a corner of his mind. It might be important.

"You think it's a boy who's been smashing the alarm glasses?"

"It was a child's handkerchief they found," said Lecœur curtly. He

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didn't want to be drawn into a discussion. He sat mutely at the switchboard, wondering what to do next.

In the Rue Michat, things seemed to be moving fast. The next time he got through it was to learn that a doctor was there as well as an examining magistrate who had most likely been dragged from his bed.

What help could Lecœur have given them? But if he wasn't there, he could see the place almost as clearly as those that were, the dismal houses and the grimy viaduct of the Métro which cut right across the landscape.

Nothing but poor people in that neighborhood. The younger generation's one hope was to escape from it. The middle-aged already doubted whether they ever would, while the old ones had already accepted their fate and tried to make the best of it.

He rang Javel once again.

"Is Gonesse still there?"

"He's writing up his report. Shall I call him?"

"Yes, please. Hallo, Gonesse, Lecœur speaking. Sorry to bother you, but did you go up to my brother's flat? Had the boy's bed been slept in? It had? Good. That makes it look a bit better. Another thing: were there any parcels there? Yes, parcels, Christmas presents. What? A small square radio. Hadn't been unpacked. Naturally. Anything else? A chicken, a *boudin*, a Saint-Honoré. I suppose Janvier's not with you? Still on the spot. Right. Has he rung up the P.J.? Good."

He was surprised to see it was already half past nine. It was no use now expecting anything from the neighborhood of the Etoile. If the boy had gone on walking as he had been earlier, he could be pretty well anywhere by this time.

"Hallo! Police Judiciaire? Is Inspector Saillard there?"

He was another whom the murder had dragged from his fireside. How many people were there whose Christmas was going to be spoiled by it?

"Excuse my troubling you, Monsieur le Commissaire. It's about that young boy, Francois Lecœur."

"Do you know anything? Is he a relation of yours?"

"He's my brother's son. And it looks as if he may well be the person who's been smashing the glasses of the telephone pillars. Seven of them. I don't know whether they've had time to tell you

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about that. What I wanted to ask was whether I might put out a general call."

"Could you nip over to see me?"

"There's no one here to take my place."

"Right. I'll come over myself. Meanwhile you can send out the call."

Lecœur kept calm, though his hand shook slightly as he plugged in once again to the room above.

"Justin? Lecœur again. Appel General. Yes. It's the same boy. Francois Lecœur. Ten and a half, rather tall for his age, thin. I don't know what he's wearing, probably a khaki jumper made from American battle-dress. No, no cap. He's always bare-headed, with plenty of hair flopping over his forehead. Perhaps it would be as well to send out a description of his father, too. That's not so easy. You know me, don't you? Well, Olivier Lecœur is rather like a paler version of me. He has a timid look about him and physically he's not robust. The sort that's never in the middle of the pavement but always dodging out of other people's way. He walks a bit queerly, owing to a wound he got in the first war. No, I haven't the least idea where they might be going, only I don't think they're together. To my mind, the boy is probably in danger. I can't explain why—it would take too long. Get the descriptions out as quickly as possible, will you? And let me know if there's any response."

By the time Lecœur had finished telephoning, Inspector Saillard was there, having only had to come round the corner from the Quai des Orfèvres. He was an imposing figure of a man, particularly in his bulky overcoat. With a comprehensive wave of the hand, he greeted the three men on watch, then, seizing a chair as though it were a wisp of straw, he swung it round towards him and sat down heavily. "The boy?" he inquired, looking keenly at Lecœur.

"I can't understand why he's stopped calling us up."

"Calling us up?"

"Attracting our attention, anyway."

"But why should he attract our attention and then not say anything?"

"Supposing he was followed. Or was following someone."

"I see what you mean. Look here, Lecœur, is your brother in financial straits?"

"He's a poor man, yes."

"Is that all?"

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"He lost his job three months ago."

"What job?"

"He was linotype operator at *La Presse* in the Rue du Croissant. He was on the night shift. He always did night work. Runs in the family."

"How did he come to lose his job?"

"I suppose he fell out with somebody."

"Is that a failing of his?"

They were interrupted by an incoming call from the Eighteenth to say that a boy selling branches of holly had been picked up in the Rue Lepic. It turned out, however, to be a little Pole who couldn't speak any French.

"You were asking if my brother was in the habit of quarreling with people. I hardly know what to answer. He was never strong. Pretty well all his childhood he was ill on and off. He hardly ever went to school. But he read a great deal alone in his room."

"Is he married?"

"His wife died two years after they were married, leaving him with a baby ten months old."

"Did he bring it up himself?"

"Entirely. I can see him now bathing the little chap, changing his diapers, and warming the milk for his bottle."

"That doesn't explain why he quarrels with people."

Admittedly. But it was difficult to put it into words.

"Soured?"

"Not exactly. The thing is—"

"What?"

"That he's never lived like other people. Perhaps Olivier isn't really very intelligent. Perhaps, from reading so much, he knows too much about some things and too little about others."

"Do you think him capable of killing the old woman?"

The Inspector puffed at his pipe. They could hear the people in the room above walking about. The two other men fiddled with their papers, pretending not to listen.

"She was his mother-in-law," sighed Lecœur. "You'd have found it out anyhow, sooner or later."

"They didn't hit it off?"

"She hated him."

"Why?"

"She considered him responsible for her daughter's death. It seems she could have been saved if the operation had been done in time.

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It wasn't my brother's fault. The people at the hospital refused to take her in. Some silly question of her papers not being in order. All the same, Madame Fayet held to it that Olivier was to blame."

"Did they see each other?"

"Not unless they passed each other in the street, and then they never spoke."

"Did the boy know?"

"That she was his grandmother? I don't think so."

"You think his father never told him?"

Never for more than a second or two did Lecœur's eyes leave the plan of Paris, but, besides being Christmas, it was the quiet time of the day, and the little lamps lit up rarely. Two or three street accidents, a lady's handbag snatched in the Métro, a suitcase pinched at the Gare de l'Est.

No sign of the boy. It was surprising considering how few people were about. In the poor quarters a few little children played on the pavements with their new toys, but on the whole the day was lived indoors. Nearly all the shops were shuttered and the cafes and the little bars were almost empty.

For a moment, the town came to life a bit when the church bells started pealing and families in their Sunday best hurried to High Mass. But soon the streets were quiet again, though haunted here and there by the vague rumble of an organ or a sudden gust of singing.

The thought of churches gave Lecœur an idea. Might not the boy have tucked himself away in one of them? Would the police think of looking there? He spoke to Inspector Saillard about it and then got through to Justin for the third time.

"The churches. Ask them to have a look at the congregations. They'll be doing the stations, of course—that's most important."

He took off his glasses for a moment, showing eyelids that were red, probably from lack of sleep.

"Hallo! Yes. The Inspector's here. Hold on."

He held the receiver to Saillard. "It's Janvier."

The bitter wind was still driving through the streets. The light was harsh and bleak, though here and there among the closely packed clouds was a yellowy streak which could be taken as a faint promise of sunshine to come.

When the Inspector put down the receiver, he muttered, "Dr. Paul says the crime was committed between five and half past six this

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morning. The old woman wasn't killed by the first blow. Apparently she was in bed when she heard a noise and got up and faced the intruder. Indeed, it looks as though she tried to defend herself with the only weapon that came to hand—a shoe."

"Have they found the weapon she was killed with?"

"No. It might have been a hammer. More likely a bit of lead piping or something of that sort."

"Have they found her money?"

"Only her purse, with some small change in it and her identity card. Tell me, Lecœur, did you know she was a money-lender?"

"Yes. I knew."

"And didn't you tell me your brother's been out of work for three months?"

"He has."

"The concierge didn't know."

"Neither did the boy. It was for his sake he kept it dark."

The Inspector crossed and uncrossed his legs. He was uncomfortable. He glanced at the other two men who couldn't help hearing everything, then turned with a puzzled look to stare at Lecœur.

"Do you realize what all this is pointing to?"

"I do."

"You've thought of it yourself?"

"No."

"Because he's your brother?"

"No."

"How long is it that this killer's been at work? Nine weeks, isn't it?"

Without haste, Lecœur studied the columns of his notebook.

"Yes. Just over nine weeks. The first was on the twentieth of October, in the Epinettes district."

"You say your brother didn't tell his son he was out of a job. Do you mean to say he went on leaving home in the evening just as though he was going to work?"

"Yes. He couldn't face the idea of telling him. You see—it's difficult to explain. He was completely wrapped up in the boy. He was all he had to live for. He cooked and scrubbed for him, tucked him up in bed before going off, and woke him up in the morning."

"That doesn't explain why he couldn't tell him."

"He couldn't bear the thought of appearing to the kid as a failure, a man nobody wanted and who had doors slammed in his face."

"But what did he do with himself all night?"

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"Odd jobs. When he could get them. For a fortnight, he was employed as night watchman in a factory in Billancourt, but that was only while the regular man was ill. Often he got a few hours' work washing down cars in one of the big garages. When that failed, he'd sometimes lend a hand at the market unloading vegetables. When he had one of his bouts—"

"Bouts of what?"

"Asthma. He had them from time to time. Then he'd lie down in a station waiting room. Once he spent a whole night here, chatting with me."

"Suppose the boy woke up early this morning and saw his father at Madame Fayet's?"

"There was frost on the windows."

"There wouldn't be if the window was open. Lots of people sleep with their windows open even in the coldest weather."

"It wasn't the case with my brother. He was always a chilly person. And he was much too poor to waste warmth."

"As far as his window was concerned, the boy had only to scratch away the frost with his fingernails. When I was a boy—"

"Yes. So did I. The thing is to find out whether the old woman's window was open."

"It was, and the light was switched on."

"I wonder where Francois can have got to."

"The boy?"

It was surprising and a little disconcerting the way he kept all the time reverting to him. The situation was certainly embarrassing, and somehow made all the more so by the calm way in which Andre Lecœur gave the Inspector the most damaging details about his brother.

"When he came in this morning," began Saillard again, "he was carrying a number of parcels. You realize—"

"It's Christmas."

"Yes. But he'd have needed quite a bit of money to buy a chicken, a cake, and that new radio. Has he borrowed any from you lately?"

"Not for a month. I haven't seen him for a month. I wish I had. I'd have told him that I was getting a radio for Francois myself. I've got it here. Downstairs, that is, in the cloakroom. I was going to take it straight round as soon as I was relieved."

"Would Madame Fayet have consented to lend him money?"

"It's unlikely. She was a queer lot. She must have had quite enough money to live on, yet she still went out to work, charring

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from morning to evening. Often she lent money to the people she worked for. At exorbitant interest, of course. All the neighborhood knew about it, and people always came to her when they needed something to tide them over till the end of the month."

Still embarrassed, the Inspector rose to his feet. "I'm going to have a look," he said.

"At Madame Fayet's?"

"There and in the Rue Vasco de Gama. If you get any news, let me know, will you?"

"You won't find any telephone there, but I can get a message to you through the Javel police station."

The Inspector's footsteps had hardly died away before the telephone bell rang. No lamp had lit up on the wall. This was an outside call, coming from the Gare d'Austerlitz.

"Lecœur? Station police speaking. We've got him."

"Who?"

"The man whose description was circulated. Lecœur. Same as you. Olivier Lecœur. No doubt about it, I've seen his identity card."

"Hold on, will you?"

Lecœur dashed out of the room and down the stairs just in time to catch the Inspector as he was getting into one of the cars belonging to the Prefecture.

"Inspector! The Gare d'Austerlitz is on the phone. They've found my brother."

Saillard was a stout man and he went up the stairs puffing and blowing. He took the receiver himself.

"Hallo! Yes. Where was he? What was he doing? What? No, there's no point in your questioning him now. You're sure he didn't know? Right. Go on looking out. It's quite possible. As for him, send him here straightaway. At the Prefecture, yes."

He hesitated for a second and glanced at Lecœur before saying finally, "Yes. Send someone with him. We can't take any risks."

The Inspector filled his pipe and lit it before explaining, and when he spoke he looked at nobody in particular.

"He was picked up after he'd been wandering about the station for over an hour. He seemed very jumpy. Said he was waiting there to meet his son, from whom he'd received a message."

"Did they tell him about the murder?"

"Yes. He appeared to be staggered by the news and terrified. I asked them to bring him along." Rather diffidently he added: "I

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asked them to bring him here. Considering your relationship, I didn't want you to think—"

Lecœur had been in that room since eleven o'clock the night before. It was rather like his early years when he spent his days in his mother's kitchen. Around him was an unchanging world. There were the little lamps, of course, that kept going on and off, but that's what they always did. They were part and parcel of the immutability of the place. Time flowed by without anyone noticing it.

Yet, outside, Paris was celebrating Christmas. Thousands of people had been to Midnight Mass, thousands more had spent the night roistering, and those who hadn't known where to draw the line had sobered down in the police station and were now being called upon to explain things they couldn't remember doing.

What had his brother Olivier been doing all through the night? An old woman had been found dead. A boy had started before dawn on a breathless race through the streets, breaking the glass of the telephone pillars as he passed them, having wrapped his handkerchief round his fist.

And what was Olivier waiting for at the Gare d'Austerlitz, sometimes in the overheated waiting rooms, sometimes on the windswept platforms, too nervous to settle down in any one place for long?

Less than ten minutes elapsed, just time enough for Godin, whose nose really was running, to make himself another glass of hot grog.

"Can I offer you one, Monsieur le Commissaire?"

"No, thanks."

Looking more embarrassed than ever, Saillard leaned over towards Lecœur to say in an undertone, "Would you like us to question him in another room?"

No. Lecœur wasn't going to leave his post for anything. He wanted to stay there, with his little lamps and his switchboard. Was it that he was thinking more of the boy than of his brother?

Olivier came in with a detective on either side, but they had spared him the handcuffs. He looked dreadful, like a bad photograph faded with age. At once he turned to Andre. "Where's Francois?"

"We don't know. We're hunting for him."

"Where?"

Andre Lecœur pointed to his plan of Paris and his switchboard of a thousand lines. "Everywhere."

The two detectives had already been sent away.

"Sit down," said the Inspector. "I believe you've been told of Madame Fayet's death."

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Olivier didn't wear spectacles, but he had the same pale and rather fugitive eyes as his brother had when he took his glasses off. He glanced at the Inspector, by whom he didn't seem the least overawed, then turned back to Andre. "He left a note for me," he said, delving into one of the pockets of his grubby mackintosh. "Here. See if you can understand."

He held out a bit of paper torn out of a schoolboy's exercise book. The writing wasn't any too good. It didn't look as though Francois was the best of pupils. He had used an indelible pencil, wetting the end in his mouth, so that his lips were very likely stained with it.

"Uncle Gedeon arrives this morning Gare d'Austerlitz. Come as soon as you can and meet us there. Love. Bib."

Without a word, Andre Lecœur passed it on to the Inspector, who turned it over and over with his thick fingers. "What's Bib stand for?"

"It's his nickname. A baby name. I never use it when other people are about. It comes from *biberon*. When I used to give him his bottle—" He spoke in a toneless voice. He seemed to be in a fog and was probably only dimly conscious of where he was.

"Who's Uncle Gedeon?"

"There isn't any such person."

Did he realize he was talking to the head of the Brigade des Homicides, who was at the moment investigating a murder?

It was his brother who came to the rescue, explaining, "As a matter of fact, we had an Uncle Gedeon but he's been dead for some years. He was one of my mother's brothers who emigrated to America as a young man."

Olivier looked at his brother as much as to say: What's the point of going into that?

"We got into the habit, in the family, of speaking—jocularly, of course—of our rich American uncle and of the fortune he'd leave us one day."

"Was he rich?"

"We didn't know. We never heard from him except for a postcard once a year, signed Gedeon. Wishing us a happy New Year."

"He died?"

"When Francois was four."

"Really, Andre, do you think it's any use—"

"Let me go on. The Inspector wants to know everything. My brother carried on the family tradition, talking to his son about our Uncle Gedeon, who had become by now quite a legendary figure. He

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provided a theme for bedtime stories, and all sorts of adventures were attributed to him. Naturally he was fabulously rich, and when one day he came back to France—"

"I understand. He died out there?"

"In a hospital in Cleveland. It was then we found out he had been really a porter in a restaurant. It would have been too cruel to tell the boy that, so the legend went on."

"Did he believe in it?"

It was Olivier who answered. "My brother thought he didn't, that he'd guessed the truth but wasn't going to spoil the game. But I always maintained the contrary and I'm still practically certain he took it all in. He was like that. Long after his schoolfellows had stopped believing in Father Christmas, he still went on."

Talking about his son brought him back to life, transfigured him.

"But as for this note he left, I don't know what to make of it. I asked the concierge if a telegram had come. For a moment I thought Andre might have played us a practical joke, but I soon dismissed the idea. It isn't much of a joke to get a boy dashing off to a station on a freezing night. Naturally I dashed off to the Gare d'Austerlitz as fast as I could. There I hunted high and low, then wandered about, waiting anxiously for him to turn up. Andre, you're sure he hasn't been—"

He looked at the street plan on the wall and at the switchboard. He knew very well that every accident was reported.

"He hasn't been run over," said Andre. "At about eight o'clock he was near the Etoile, but we've completely lost track of him since then."

"Near the Etoile? How do you know?"

"It's rather a long story, but it boils down to this—that a whole series of alarms were set off by someone smashing the glass. They followed a circuitous route from your place to the Arc de Triomphe. At the foot of the last one, they found a blue-check handkerchief, a boy's handkerchief, among the broken glass."

"He has handkerchiefs like that."

"From eight o'clock onward, not a sign of him."

"Then I'd better get back to the station. He's certain to go there, if he told me to meet him there."

He was surprised at the sudden silence with which his last words were greeted. He looked from one to the other, perplexed, then anxious.

"What is it?"

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His brother looked down at the floor. Inspector Saillard cleared his throat, hesitated, then asked, "Did you go to see your mother-in-law last night?"

Perhaps, as his brother had suggested, Olivier was rather lacking in intelligence. It took a long time for the words to sink in. You could follow their progress in his features.

He had been gazing rather blankly at the Inspector. Suddenly he swung around on his brother, his cheeks red, his eyes flashing. "Andre, you dare to suggest that I—"

Without the slightest transition, his indignation faded away. He leaned forward in his chair, took his head in his two hands, and burst into a fit of raucous weeping.

Ill at ease, Inspector Saillard looked at Andre Lecœur, surprised at the latter's calmness, and a little shocked, perhaps, by what he may well have taken for heartlessness. Perhaps Saillard had never had a brother of his own. Andre had known his since childhood. It wasn't the first time he had seen Olivier break down. Not by any means. And this time he was almost pleased, as it might have been a great deal worse. What he had dreaded was the moment of indignation, and he was relieved that it had passed so quickly. Had he continued on that tack, he'd have ended by putting everyone's back up, which would have done him no good at all.

Wasn't that how he'd lost one job after another? For weeks, for months, he would go meekly about his work, toeing the line and swallowing what he felt to be humiliations, till all at once he could hold no more, and for some trifle—a chance word, a smile, a harmless contradiction—he would flare up unexpectedly and make a nuisance of himself to everybody.

What do we do now? the Inspector's eyes were asking.

Andre Lecœur's eyes answered, Wait.

It didn't last very long. The emotional crisis waned, started again, then petered out altogether. Olivier shot a sulky look at the Inspector, then hid his face again.

Finally, with an air of bitter resignation, he sat up, and with even a touch of pride said: "Fire away. I'll answer."

"At what time last night did you go to Madame Fayet's? Wait a moment. First of all, when did you leave your flat?"

"At eight o'clock, as usual, after Francois was in bed."

"Nothing exceptional happened?"

"No. We'd had supper together. Then he'd helped me to wash up."

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"Did you talk about Christmas?"

"Yes. I told him he'd be getting a surprise."

"The table radio. Was he expecting one?"

"He'd been longing for one for some time. You see, he doesn't play with the other boys in the street. Practically all his free time he spends at home."

"Did it ever occur to you that the boy might know you'd lost your job at the *Presse?* Did he ever ring you up there?"

"Never. When I'm at work, he's asleep."

"Could anyone have told him?"

"No one knew. Not in the neighborhood, that is."

"Is he observant?"

"Very. He notices everything."

"You saw him safely in bed and then you went off. Do you take anything with you—anything to eat, I mean?"

The Inspector suddenly thought of that, seeing Godin produce a ham sandwich. Olivier looked blankly at his empty hands.

"My tin."

"The tin in which you took your sandwiches?"

"Yes. I had it with me when I left. I'm sure of that. I can't think where I could have left it, unless it was at—"

"At Madame Fayet's?"

"Yes."

"Just a moment. Lecœur, get me Javel on the phone, will you? Hallo! Who's speaking? Is Janvier there? Good, ask him to speak to me. Hallo! Is that you, Janvier? Have you come across a tin box containing some sandwiches? Nothing of the sort. Really? All the same, I'd like you to make sure. Ring me back. It's important."

And, turning again to Olivier: "Was Francois actually sleeping when you left?"

"No. But he'd snuggled down in bed and soon would be. Outside, I wandered about for a bit. I walked down to the Seine and waited on the embankment."

"Waited? What for?"

"For Francois to be fast asleep. From his room you can see Madame Fayet's windows."

"So you'd made up your mind to go and see her."

"It was the only way. I hadn't a bean left."

"What about your brother?"

Olivier and Andre looked at each other.

"He'd already given me so much. I felt I couldn't ask him again."

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"You rang at the house door, I suppose. At what time?"

"A little after nine. The concierge saw me. I made no attempt to hide—except from Francois."

"Had your mother-in-law gone to bed?"

"No. She was fully dressed when she opened her door. She said, 'Oh, it's you, you wretch!' "

"After that beginning, did you still think she'd lend you money?"

"I was sure of it."

"Why?"

"It was her business. Perhaps also for the pleasure of squeezing me if I didn't pay her back. She lent me ten thousand francs, but made me sign an I.O.U. for twenty thousand."

"How soon had you to pay her back?"

"In a fortnight's time."

"How could you hope to?"

"I don't know. Somehow. The thing that mattered was for the boy to have a good Christmas."

Andre Lecœur was tempted to butt in to explain to the puzzled Inspector, "You see! He's always been like that!"

"Did you get the money easily?"

"Oh, no. We were at it for a long time."

"How long?"

"Half an hour, I daresay, and during most of that time she was calling me names, telling me I was no good to anyone and had ruined her daughter's life before I finally killed her. I didn't answer her back. I wanted the money too badly."

"You didn't threaten her?"

Olivier reddened. "Not exactly. I said if she didn't let me have it I'd kill myself."

"Would you have done it?"

"I don't think so. At least, I don't know. I was fed up, worn out."

"And when you got the money?"

"I walked to the nearest Metro station, Lourmel, and took the underground to Palais Royal. There I went into the Grands Magasins du Louvre. The place was crowded, with queues at many of the counters."

"What time was it?"

"It was after eleven before I left the place. I was in no hurry. I had a good look round. I stood a long time watching a toy electric train."

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Andre couldn't help smiling at the Inspector. "You didn't miss your sandwich tin?"

"No. I was thinking about Francois and his present."

"And with money in your pocket you banished all your cares!"

The Inspector hadn't known Olivier Lecœur since childhood, but he had sized him up all right. He had hit the nail on the head. When things were black, Olivier would go about with drooping shoulders and a hangdog air, but no sooner had he a thousand-franc note in his pocket than he'd feel on top of the world.

"To come back to Madame Fayet, you say you gave her a receipt. What did she do with it?"

"She slipped it into an old wallet she always carried about with her in a pocket somewhere under her skirt."

"So you knew about the wallet?"

"Yes. Everybody did."

The Inspector turned towards Andre.

"It hasn't been found!"

Then to Olivier: "You bought some things. In the Louvre?"

"No. I bought the little radio in the Rue Montmartre."

"In which shop?"

"I don't know the name. It's next door to a shoe shop."

"And the other things?"

"A little farther on."

"What time was it when you'd finished shopping?"

"Close on midnight. People were coming out of the theaters and movies and crowding into the restaurants. Some of them were rather noisy."

His brother at that time was already here at his switchboard.

"What did you do during the rest of the night?"

"At the corner of the Boulevard des Italiens, there's a movie that stays open all night."

"You'd been there before?"

Avoiding his brother's eye, Andre answered rather sheepishly: "Two or three times. After all, it costs no more than going into a cafe and you can stay there as long as you like. It's nice and warm. Some people go there regularly to sleep."

"When was it you decided to go to the movies?"

"As soon as I left Madame Fayet's."

Andre Lecœur was tempted to intervene once again to say to the Inspector: "You see, these people who are down and out are not so utterly miserable after all. If they were, they'd never stick it out.

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They've got a world of their own, in odd corners of which they can take refuge and even amuse themselves."

It was all so like Olivier! With a few notes in his pocket—and Heaven only knew how he was ever going to pay them back—with a few notes in his pocket, his trials were forgotten. He had only one thought: to give his boy a good Christmas. With that secured, he was ready to stand himself a little treat.

So while other families were gathered at table or knelt at Midnight Mass, Olivier went to the movies all by himself. It was the best he could do.

"When did you leave the movie?"

"A little before six."

"What was the film?"

"*Cœurs Ardents*. With a documentary on Eskimos."

"How many times did you see the program?"

"Twice right through, except for the news, which was just coming on again when I left."

Andre Lecœur knew that all this was going to be verified, if only as a matter of routine. It wasn't necessary, however. Diving into his pockets, Olivier produced the torn-off half of a movie ticket, then another ticket—a pink one. "Look at that. It's the Métro ticket I had coming home."

It bore the name of the station—Opéra—together with the date and the time.

Olivier had been telling the truth. He couldn't have been in Madame Fayet's flat any time between five and six-thirty.

There was a little spark of triumph in his eye, mixed with a touch of disdain. He seemed to be saying to them all, including his brother Andre: "Because I'm poor and unlucky I come under suspicion. I know—that's the way things are. I don't blame you."

And, funnily enough, it seemed as though all at once the room had grown colder. That was probably because, with Olivier Lecœur cleared of suspicion, everyone's thoughts reverted to the child. As though moved by one impulse, all eyes turned instinctively towards the huge plan on the wall.

Some time had elapsed since any of the lamps had lit up. Certainly it was a quiet morning. On any ordinary day there would be a street accident coming in every few minutes, particularly old women knocked down in the crowded thoroughfares of Montmartre and other overpopulated quarters.

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Today the streets were almost empty—emptier than in August, when half Paris is away on holiday.

Half past eleven. For three and a half hours there'd been no sign of Francois Lecœur.

"Hallo! Yes, Saillard speaking. Is that Janvier? You say you couldn't find a tin anywhere? Except in her kitchen, of course. Now, look here, was it you who went through the old girl's clothes? Oh, Gonesse had already done it. There should have been an old wallet in a pocket under her skirt. You're sure there wasn't anything of that sort? That's what Gonesse told you, is it? What's that about the concierge? She saw someone go up a little after nine last night. I know. I know who it was. There were people coming in and out the best part of the night? Of course. I'd like you to go back to the house in the Rue Vasco de Gama. See what you can find out about the comings and goings there, particularly on the third floor. Yes. I'll still be here."

He turned back to the boy's father, who was now sitting humbly in his chair, looking as intimidated as a patient in a doctor's waiting room.

"You understand why I asked that, don't you? Does Francois often wake up in the course of the night?"

"He's been known to get up in his sleep."

"Does he walk about?"

"No. Generally he doesn't even get right out of bed—just sits up and calls out. It's always the same thing. He thinks the house is on fire. His eyes are open, but I don't think he sees anything. Then, little by little, he calms down and with a deep sigh lies down again. The next day he doesn't remember a thing."

"Is he always asleep when you get back in the morning?"

"Not always. But if he isn't, he always pretends to be so that I can wake him up as usual with a hug."

"The people in the house were probably making more noise than usual last night. Who have you got in the next flat?"

"A Czech who works at Renault's."

"Is he married?"

"I really don't know. There are so many people in the house and they change so often we don't know much about them. All I can tell you is that on Sundays other Czechs come there and they sing a lot of their own songs."

"Janvier will tell us whether there was a party there last night. If there was, they may well have awakened the boy. Besides, children

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are apt to sleep more lightly when they're excited about a present they're expecting. If he got out of bed, he might easily have looked out of the window, in which case he might have seen you at Madame Fayet's. He didn't know she was his grandmother, did he?"

"No. He didn't like her. He sometimes passed her in the street and he used to say she smelled like a squashed bug."

The boy would probably know what he was talking about. A house like his was no doubt infested with vermin.

"He'd have been surprised to see you with her?"

"Certainly."

"Did he know she lent money?"

"Everyone knew."

"Would there be anybody working at the *Presse* on a day like this?"

"There's always somebody there."

The Inspector asked Andre to ring them up.

"See if anyone's ever been round to ask for your brother."

Olivier looked uncomfortable, but when his brother reached for the telephone directory, he gave him the number. Both he and the Inspector stared at Andre while he got through.

"It's very important, Mademoiselle. It may even be a matter of life and death. Yes, please. See if you can find out. Ask everybody who's in the building now. What? Yes, I know it's Christmas Day. It's Christmas Day here, too, but we have to carry on just the same."

Between his teeth he muttered, "Silly little bitch!"

He could hear the linotypes clicking as he held the line, waiting for her answer.

"Yes. What? Three weeks ago. A young boy—"

Olivier went pale in the face. His eyes dropped, and during the rest of the conversation he stared obstinately at his hands.

"He didn't telephone? Came round himself. At what time? On a Thursday, you say. What did he want? Asked if Olivier Lecœur worked there? What? What was he told?"

Looking up, Olivier saw a flush spread over his brother's face before he banged down the receiver.

"Francois went there one Thursday afternoon. He must have suspected something. They told him you hadn't been working there for some time."

There was no point in repeating what he had heard. What they'd said to the boy was: "We chucked the old fool out weeks ago."

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Perhaps not out of cruelty. They may not have thought it was the man's son they were speaking to.

"Do you begin to understand, Olivier?"

Did he realize that the situation was the reverse of what he had imagined? He had been going off at night, armed with his little box of sandwiches, keeping up an elaborate pretense. And in the end he had been the one to be taken in!

The boy had found him out. And wasn't it only fair to suppose that he had seen through the Uncle Gedeon story, too?

He hadn't said a word. He had simply fallen in with the game.

No one dared say anything for fear of saying too much, for fear of evoking images that would be heartrending.

A father and a son each lying to avoid hurting the other.

They had to look at it through the eyes of the child, with all childhood's tragic earnestness. His father kisses him good night and goes off to the job that doesn't really exist, saying: "Sleep well. There'll be a surprise for you in the morning."

A radio. It could only be that. And didn't he know that his father's pockets were empty? Did he try to go to sleep? Or did he get up as soon as his father had gone, to sit miserably staring out of the window obsessed by one thought? *His father had no money—yet he was going to buy him a radio!*

To the accompaniment, in all probability, of a full-throated Czech choir singing their national songs on the other side of the thin wall!

The Inspector sighed and knocked out his pipe on his heel.

"It looks as though he saw you at Madame Fayet's."

Olivier nodded.

"We'll check up on this, but it seems likely that, looking down from his window, he wouldn't see very far into the room."

"That's quite right."

"Could he have seen you leave the room?"

"No. The door's on the opposite side from the window."

"Do you remember going near the window?"

"At one time I was sitting on the windowsill."

"Was the window open then? We know it was later."

"It was open a few inches. I'm sure of that, because I moved away from it, as I felt an icy draught on my back. She lived with us for a while, just after our marriage, and I know she couldn't bear not to have her window open all the year round. You see, she'd been brought up in the country."

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"So there'd be no frost on the panes. He'd certainly have seen you if he was looking."

A call. Lecœur thrust his contact plug into one of the sockets.

"Yes. What's that? A boy?"

The other two held their breath.

"Yes. Yes. What? Yes. Send out the *agents cyclistes*. Comb the whole neighborhood. I'll see about the station. How long ago was it? Half an hour? Couldn't he have let us know sooner?"

Without losing time over explanations, Lecœur plugged in to the Gare du Nord.

"Hallo! Gare du Nord! Who's speaking? Ah, Lambert. Listen, this is urgent. Have the station searched from end to end. Ask everybody if they've seen a boy of ten wandering about. What? Alone? He may be. Or he may be accompanied. We don't know. Let me know what you find out. Yes, of course. Grab him at once if you set eyes on him."

"Did you say accompanied?" asked Olivier anxiously.

"Why not? It's possible. Anything's possible. Of course, it may not be him. If it is, we're half an hour late. It was a small grocer in the Rue de Maubeuge whose shopfront is open onto the street. He saw a boy snatch a couple of oranges and make off. He didn't run after him. Only later, when a policeman passed, he thought he might as well mention it."

"Had your son any money?" asked the Inspector.

"Not a sou."

"Hasn't he got a money-box?"

"Yes. But I borrowed what was in it two days ago, saying that I didn't want to change a banknote."

A pathetic little confession, but what did things like that matter now?

"Don't you think it would be better if I went to the Gare du Nord myself?"

"I doubt if it would help, and we may need you here."

They were almost prisoners in that room. With its direct links with every nerve center of Paris, that was the place where any news would first arrive. Even in his room in the Police Judiciaire, the Inspector would be less well placed. He had thought of going back there, but now at last took off his overcoat, deciding to see the job through where he was.

"If he had no money, he couldn't take a bus or the Métro. Nor

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could he go into a cafe or use a public telephone. He probably hasn't had anything to eat since his supper last night."

"But what can he be doing?" exclaimed Olivier, becoming more and more nervous. "And why should he have sent me to the Gare d'Austerlitz?"

"Perhaps to help you get away," grunted Saillard.

"Get away? Me?"

"Listen. The boy knows you're down and out. Yet you're going to buy him a little radio. I'm not reproaching you. I'm just looking at the facts. He leans on the windowsill and sees you with the old woman he knows to be a money-lender. What does he conclude?"

"I see."

"That you've gone to her to borrow money. He may be touched by it, he may be saddened—we don't know. He goes back to bed and to sleep."

"You think so?"

"I'm pretty sure of it. Anyhow, we've no reason to think he left the house then."

"No. Of course not."

"Let's say he goes back to sleep, then. But he wakes up early, as children mostly do on Christmas Day. And the first thing he notices is the frost on the window. The first frost this winter, don't forget that. He wants to look at it, to touch it."

A faint smile flickered across Andre Lecœur's face. This massive Inspector hadn't forgotten what it was like to be a boy.

"He scratches a bit of it away with his nails. It won't be difficult to get confirmation, for once the frost is tampered with it can't form again in quite the same pattern. What does he notice then? That in the buildings opposite one window is lit up, and one only—the window of the room in which a few hours before he had seen his father. It's guesswork, of course, but I don't mind betting he saw the body, or part of it. If he'd merely seen a foot it would have been enough to startle him."

"You mean to say—" began Olivier, wide-eyed.

"That he thought you'd killed her. As I did myself—for a moment. And very likely not her only. Just think for a minute. The man who's been committing all these murders is a man, like you, who wanders about at night. His victims live in the poorer quarters of Paris, like Madame Fayet in the Rue Michat. Does the boy know anything of how you've been spending your nights since you lost your job? No. All that he has to go on is that he has seen you in the

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murdered woman's room. Would it be surprising if his imagination got to work?

"You said just now that you sat on the windowsill. Might it be there that you put down your box of sandwiches?"

"Now I come to think of it, yes. I'm practically sure."

"Then he saw it. And he's quite old enough to know what the police would think when they saw it lying there. Is your name on it?"

"Yes. Scratched on the lid."

"You see! He thought you'd be coming home as usual between seven and eight. The thing was to get you as quickly as possible out of the danger zone."

"You mean—by writing me that note?"

"Yes. He didn't know what to say. He couldn't refer to the murder without compromising you. Then he thought of Uncle Gedeon. Whether he believed in his existence or not doesn't matter. He knew you'd go to the Gare d'Austerlitz."

"But he's not yet eleven!"

"Boys of that age know a lot more than you think. Doesn't he read detective stories?"

"Yes."

"Of course he does. They all do. If they don't read them, they get them on the radio. Perhaps that's why he wanted a set of his own so badly."

"It's true."

"He couldn't stay in the flat to wait for you, for he had something more important to do. He had to get hold of that box. I suppose he knew the courtyard well. He'd played there, hadn't he?"

"At one time, yes. With the concierge's little girl."

"So he'd know about the rainwater pipes, may even have climbed up them for sport."

"Very well," said Olivier, suddenly calm, "let's say he gets into the room and takes the box. He wouldn't need to climb down the way he'd come. He could simply walk out of the flat and out of the house. You can open the house door from inside without knocking up the concierge. You say it was at about six o'clock, don't you?"

"I see what you're driving at," grunted the Inspector. "Even at a leisurely pace, it would hardly have taken him two hours to walk to the Gare d'Austerlitz. Yet he wasn't there."

Leaving them to thrash it out, Lecœur was busy telephoning.

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"No news yet?"

And the man at the Gare du Nord answered, "Nothing so far. We've pounced on any number of boys, but none of them was Francois Lecœur."

Admittedly, any street boy could have pinched a couple of oranges and taken to his heels. The same couldn't be said for the broken glass of the telephone pillars, however. Andre Lecœur looked once again at the column with the seven crosses, as though some clue might suddenly emerge from them. He had never thought himself much cleverer than his brother. Where he scored was in patience and perseverance.

"If the box of sandwiches is ever found, it'll be at the bottom of the Seine near the Pont Mirabeau," he said.

Steps in the corridor. On an ordinary day they would not have been noticed, but in the stillness of a Christmas morning everyone listened.

It was an *agent cycliste*, who produced a bloodstained blue-check handkerchief, the one that had been found among the glass splinters at the seventh telephone pillar.

"That's his, all right," said the boy's father.

"He must have been followed," said the Inspector. "If he'd had time, he wouldn't merely have broken the glass. He'd have said something."

"Who by?" asked Olivier, who was the only one not to understand. "Who'd want to follow him?" he asked. "And why should he call the police?"

They hesitated to put him wise. In the end it was his brother who explained:

"When he went to the old woman's he thought you were the murderer. When he came away, he knew you weren't. He knew—"

"Knew what?"

"He knew who was. Do you understand now? He found out something, though we don't know what. He wants to tell us about it, but someone's stopping him."

"You mean?"

"I mean that Francois is after the murderer or the murderer is after him. One is following, one is followed—we don't know which. By the way, Inspector, is there a reward offered?"

"A handsome reward was offered after the third murder and it was doubled last week. It's been in all the papers."

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"Then my guess," said Andre Lecœur, "is that it's the kid who's doing the following. Only in that case—"

It was twelve o'clock, four hours since they'd lost track of him. Unless, of course, it was he who had snaffled the oranges in the Rue Maubeuge.

Might not this be his great moment? Andre Lecœur had read somewhere that even to the dullest and most uneventful lives such a moment comes sooner or later.

He had never had a particularly high opinion of himself or of his abilities. When people asked him why he'd chosen so dreary and monotonous a job rather than one in, say, the Brigade des Homicides, he would answer: "I suppose I'm lazy."

Sometimes he would add:

"I'm scared of being knocked about."

As a matter of fact, he was neither lazy nor a coward. If he lacked anything it was brains.

He knew it. All he had learned at school had cost him a great effort. The police exams that others took so easily in their stride, he had only passed by dint of perseverance.

Was it a consciousness of his own shortcomings that had kept him single? Possibly. It seemed to him that the sort of woman he would want to marry would be his superior, and he didn't relish the idea of playing second fiddle in the home.

But he wasn't thinking of all this now. Indeed, if this was his moment of greatness, it was stealing upon him unawares.

Another team arrived, those of the second day shift looking very fresh and well groomed in their Sunday clothes. They had been celebrating Christmas with their families, and they brought in with them, as it were, a whiff of good viands and liqueurs.

Old Bedeau had taken his place at the switchboard, but Lecœur made no move to go.

"I'll stay on a bit," he said simply.

Inspector Saillard had gone for a quick lunch at the Brasserie Dauphine just around the corner, leaving strict injunctions that he was to be fetched at once if anything happened. Janvier was back at the Quai des Orfèvres, writing up his report.

If Lecœur was tired, he didn't notice it. He certainly wasn't sleepy and couldn't bear the thought of going home to bed. He had plenty of stamina. Once, when there were riots in the Place de la Concorde, he had done thirty-six hours nonstop, and on another occasion, dur-

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ing a general strike, they had all camped in the room for four days and nights.

His brother showed the strain more. He was getting jumpy again.

"I'm going," he announced suddenly.

"Where to?"

"To find Bib."

"Where?"

"I don't know exactly. I'll start round the Gare du Nord."

"How do you know it was Bib who stole the oranges? He may be at the other end of Paris. We might get news at any minute. You'd better stay."

"I can't stand this waiting."

He was nevertheless persuaded to. He was given a chair in a corner. He refused to lie down. His eyes were red with anxiety and fatigue. He sat fidgeting, looking rather as, when a boy, he had been put in the corner.

With more self-control, Andre forced himself to take some rest. Next to the big room was a little one with a wash-basin, where they hung their coats and which was provided with a couple of camp beds on which the *nuiteux* could lie down during a quiet hour.

He shut his eyes, but only for a moment. Then his hand felt for the little notebook which never left him, and lying on his back he began to turn over the pages.

There were nothing but crosses, columns and columns of tiny little crosses which, month after month, year after year, he had accumulated, Heaven knows why. Just to satisfy something inside him. After all, other people keep a diary—or the most meticulous household accounts, even when they don't need to economize at all.

Those crosses told the story of the night life of Paris.

"Some coffee, Lecœur?"

"Thanks."

Feeling rather out of touch where he was, he dragged his camp bed into the big room, placing it in a position from which he could see the wall-plan. There he sipped his coffee, after which he stretched himself out again, sometimes studying his notebook, sometimes lying with his eyes shut. Now and again he stole a glance at his brother, who sat hunched in his chair with drooping shoulders, the twitching of his long white fingers being the only sign of the torture he was enduring.

There were hundreds of men now, not only in Paris but in the

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suburbs, keeping their eyes skinned for the boy whose description had been circulated. Sometimes false hopes were raised, only to be dashed when the exact particulars were given.

Lecœur shut his eyes again, but opened them suddenly next moment, as though he had actually dozed off. He glanced at the clock, then looked round for the Inspector.

"Hasn't Saillard got back yet?" he asked, getting to his feet.

"I expect he's looked in at the Quai des Orfèvres."

Olivier stared at his brother, surprised to see him pacing up and down the room. The latter was so absorbed in his thoughts that he hardly noticed that the sun had broken through the clouds, bathing Paris on that Christmas afternoon in a glow of light more like that of spring.

While thinking, he listened, and it wasn't long before he heard Inspector Saillard's heavy tread outside.

"You'd better go and get some sandwiches," he said to his brother. "Get some for me, too."

"What kind?"

"Ham. Anything. Whatever you find."

Olivier went out, after a parting glance at the map, relieved, in spite of his anxiety, to be doing something.

The men of the afternoon shift knew little of what was afoot, except that the killer had done another job the previous night and that there was a general hunt for a small boy. For them, the case couldn't have the flavor it had for those who were involved. At the switchboard, Bedeau was doing a crossword with his earphones on his head, breaking off from time to time for the classic: "Hallo! Austerlitz. Your car's out."

A body fished out of the Seine. You couldn't have a Christmas without that!

"Could I have a word with you, Inspector?"

The camp bed was back in the cloakroom. It was there that Lecœur led the chief of the homicide squad.

"I hope you won't mind my butting in. I know it isn't for me to make suggestions. But, about the killer—"

He had his little notebook in his hand. He must have known its contents almost by heart.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking since this morning and—"

A little while ago, while he was lying down, it had seemed so

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clear, but now that he had to explain things, it was difficult to put them in logical order.

"It's like this. First of all, I noticed that all the murders were committed after two in the morning, most of them after three."

He could see by the look on the Inspector's face that he hadn't exactly scored a hit, and he hurried on:

"I've been looking up the times of other murders over the past three years. They were nearly always between ten in the evening and two in the morning."

Neither did that observation seem to make much impression. Why not take the bull by the horns and say straight out what was on his mind?

"Just now, looking at my brother, it occurred to me that the man you're looking for might be a man like him. As a matter of fact, I, too, for a moment wondered whether it wasn't him. Wait a moment—"

That was better. The look of polite boredom had gone from Saillard's face.

"If I'd had more experience in this sort of work I'd be able to explain myself better. But you'll see in a moment. A man who's killed eight people one after the other is, if not a madman, at any rate a man who's been thrown off his balance. He might have had a sudden shock. Take my brother, for instance. When he lost his job it upset him so much that he preferred to live in a tissue of lies rather than let his son—"

No. Put into words, it all sounded very clumsy.

"When a man suddenly loses everything he has in life—"

"He doesn't necessarily go mad."

"I'm not saying he's actually mad. But imagine a person so full of resentment that he considers himself justified in revenging himself on his fellow-men. I don't need to point out to you, Inspector, that other murderers always kill in much the same way. This one has used a hammer, a knife, a spanner, and one woman he strangled. And he's never been seen, never left a clue. Wherever he lives in Paris, he must have walked miles and miles at night when there was no transport available, sometimes, when the alarm had been given, with the police on the lookout, questioning everybody they found in the streets. How is it he avoided them?"

He was certain he was on the right track. If only Saillard would hear him out.

The Inspector sat on one of the camp beds. The cloakroom was

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small, and as Lecœur paced up and down in front of him he could do no more than three paces each way.

"This morning, for instance, assuming he was with the boy, he went halfway across Paris, keeping out of sight of every police station and every traffic point where there'd be a man on duty."

"You mean he knows the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Arrondissements by heart?"

"And not those only. At least two others, the Twelfth and the Twentieth, as he showed on previous occasions. He didn't choose his victims haphazardly. He knew they lived alone and could be done in without any great risk."

What a nuisance! There was his brother, saying: "Here are the sandwiches, Andre."

"Thanks. Go ahead, will you? Don't wait for me. I'll be with you in a moment."

He bundled Olivier back into his corner and returned to the cloakroom. He didn't want him to hear.

"If he's used a different weapon each time, it's because he knows it will puzzle us. He knows that murderers generally have their own way and stick to it."

The Inspector had risen to his feet and was staring at Andre with a faraway look, as though he was following a train of thought of his own.

"You mean that he's—"

"That he's one of us—or has been. I can't get the idea out of my head."

He lowered his voice.

"Someone who's been up against it in the same sort of way as my brother. A discharged fireman might take to arson. It's happened two or three times. A policeman—"

"But why should he steal?"

"Wasn't my brother in need of money? This other chap may be like him in more ways than one. Supposing he, too, was a night worker and goes on pretending he's still in a job. That would explain why the crimes are committed so late. He has to be out all night. The first part of it is easy enough—the cafes and bars are open. Afterward, he's all alone with himself."

As though to himself, Saillard muttered: "There wouldn't be anybody in the personnel department on a day like this."

"Perhaps you could ring up the director at his home. He might remember . . ."

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"Hallo! Can I speak to Monsieur Guillaume, please? He's not in? Where could I reach him? At his daughter's in Ateuil? Have you got the number?

"Hallo! Monsieur Guillaume? Saillard speaking. I hope I'm not disturbing you too much. Oh, you'd finished, had you? Good. It's about the killer. Yes, there's been another one. No. Nothing definite. Only we have an idea that needs checking, and it's urgent. Don't be too surprised at my question.

"Has any member of the Paris police been sacked recently—say two or three months ago? I beg your pardon? Not a single one this year? I see."

Lecœur felt a sudden constriction around his heart, as though overwhelmed by a catastrophe, and threw a pathetic, despairing look at the wall-map. He had already given up and was surprised to hear his chief go on:

"As a matter of fact, it doesn't need to be as recent as all that. It would be someone who had worked in various parts of Paris, including the Fifteenth and Sixteenth. Probably also the Twelfth and Twentieth. Seems to have done a good deal of night work. Also to have been embittered by his dismissal. What?"

The way Saillard pronounced that last word gave Lecœur renewed hope.

"Sergeant Loubet? Yes, I remember the name, though I never actually came across him. Three years ago! You wouldn't know where he lived, I suppose? Somewhere near Les Halles?"

Three years ago. No, it wouldn't do, and Lecœur's heart sank again. You could hardly expect a man to bottle up his resentments for three years and then suddenly start hitting back.

"Have you any idea what became of him? No, of course not. And it's not a good day for finding out."

He hung up and looked thoughtfully at Lecœur. When he spoke, it was as though he was addressing an equal.

"Did you hear? Sergeant Loubet. He was constantly getting into trouble and was shifted three or four times before being finally dismissed. Drink. That was his trouble. He took his dismissal very hard. Guillaume can't say for certain what has become of him, but he thinks he joined a private detective agency. If you'd like to have a try—"

Lecœur set to work. He had little hope of succeeding, but it was better to do something than sit watching for the little lamps in the street-plan. He began with the agencies of the most doubtful rep-

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utation, refusing to believe that a person such as Loubet would readily find a job with a reputable firm. Most of the offices were shut, and he had to ring up their proprietors at home.

"Don't know him. You'd better try Tisserand in the Boulevard Saint-Martin. He's the one who takes all the riffraff."

But Tisserand, a firm that specialized in shadowings, was no good, either.

"Don't speak to me of that good-for-nothing. It's a good two months or more since I chucked him out, in spite of his threatening to blackmail me. If he ever shows up at my office again, I'll throw him down the stairs."

"What sort of job did he have?"

"Night work. Watching blocks of flats."

"Did he drink much?"

"He wasn't often sober. I don't know how he managed it, but he always knew where to get free drinks. Blackmail again, I suppose."

"Can you give me his address?"

"Twenty-seven bis, Rue du Pas-de-la-Mule."

"Does he have a telephone?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I've never had the slightest desire to ring him up. Is that all? Can I go back to my game of bridge?"

The Inspector had already snatched up the telephone directory and was looking for Loubet's number. He rang up himself. There was now a tacit understanding between him and Lecœur. They shared the same hope, the same trembling eagerness, while Olivier, realizing that something important was going on, came and stood near them.

Without being invited, Andre did something he wouldn't have dreamed of doing that morning. He picked up the second earphone to listen in. The bell rang in the flat in the Rue du Pas-de-la-Mule. It rang for a long time, as though the place was deserted, and his anxiety was becoming acute when at last it stopped and a voice answered.

Thank Heaven! It was a woman's voice, an elderly one. "Is that you at last? Where are you?"

"Hallo! This isn't your husband here, Madame."

"Has he met with an accident?"

From the hopefulness of her tone, it sounded as though she had long been expecting one and wouldn't be sorry when it happened.

"It is Madame Loubet I'm speaking to, isn't it?"

"Who else would it be?"

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"Your husband's not at home?"

"First of all, who are you?"

"Inspector Saillard."

"What do you want him for?"

The Inspector put his hand over the mouthpiece to say to Lecœur: "Get through to Janvier. Tell him to dash round there as quick as he can."

"Didn't your husband come home this morning?"

"You ought to know! I thought the police knew everything!"

"Does it often happen?"

"That's his business, isn't it?"

No doubt she hated her drunkard of a husband, but now that he was threatened she was ready to stand up for him.

"I suppose you know he no longer belongs to the police force."

"Perhaps he found a cleaner job."

"When did he stop working for the Agence Argus?"

"What's that? What are you getting at?"

"I assure you, Madame, your husband was dismissed from the Agence Argus over two months ago."

"You're lying."

"Which means that for these last two months he's been going off to work every evening."

"Where else would he be going? To the Folies Bergère?"

"Have you any idea why he hasn't come back today? He hasn't telephoned, has he?"

She must have been afraid of saying the wrong thing, for she rang off without another word.

When the Inspector put his receiver down, he turned round to see Lecœur standing behind him, looking away. In a shaky voice, the latter said:

"Janvier's on his way now."

He was treated as an equal. He knew it wouldn't last, that tomorrow, sitting at his switchboard, he would be once more but a small cog in the huge wheel.

The others simply didn't count—not even his brother, whose timid eyes darted from one to the other uncomprehendingly, wondering why, if his boy's life was in danger, they talked so much instead of doing something.

Twice he had to pluck at Andre's sleeve to get a word in edgewise.

"Let me go and look for him myself," he begged.

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What could he do? The hunt had widened now. A description of ex-Sergeant Loubet had been passed to all police stations and patrols.

It was no longer only a boy of ten who was being looked for, but also a man of fifty-eight, probably the worse for drink, dressed in a black overcoat with a velvet collar and an old grey-felt hat, a man who knew his Paris like the palm of his hand, and who was acquainted with the police.

Janvier had returned, looking fresher than the men there in spite of his night's vigil.

"She tried to slam the door in my face, but I'd taken the precaution of sticking my foot in. She doesn't know anything. She says he's been handing over his pay every month."

"That's why he had to steal. He didn't need big sums. In fact, he wouldn't have known what to do with them. What's she like?"

"Small and dark, with piercing eyes. Her hair's dyed a sort of blue. She must have eczema or something of the sort—she wears mittens."

"Did you get a photo of him?"

"There was one on the dining-room sideboard. She wouldn't give it to me, so I just took it."

A heavy-built, florid man, with bulging eyes, who in his youth had probably been the village beau and had conserved an air of stupid arrogance. The photograph was some years old. No doubt he looked quite different now.

"She didn't give you any idea where he was likely to be, did she?"

"As far as I could make out, except at night, when he was supposed to be at work, she kept him pretty well tied to her apron strings. I talked to the concierge, who told me he was scared stiff of his wife. Often she's seen him stagger home in the morning, then suddenly pull himself together when he went upstairs. He goes out shopping with his wife. In fact, he never goes out alone in the daytime. If she goes out when he's in bed, she locks him in."

"What do you think, Lecœur?"

"I'm wondering whether my nephew and he aren't together."

"What do you mean?"

"They weren't together at the beginning, or Loubet would have stopped the boy giving the alarm. There must have been some distance between them. One was following the other."

"Which way round?"

"When the kid climbed up the drainpipe, he thought his father was guilty. Otherwise, why should he have sent him off to the Gare

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d'Austerlitz, where no doubt he intended to join him after getting rid of the sandwich tin?"

"It looks like it."

"No, Andre. Francois could never have thought—"

"Leave this alone. You don't understand. At that time the crime had certainly been committed. Francois wouldn't have dreamed of burgling someone's flat for a tin box if it hadn't been that he'd seen the body."

"From his window," put in Janvier, "he could see most of the legs."

"What we don't know is whether the murderer was still there."

"I can't believe he was," said Saillard. "If he had been, he'd have kept out of sight, let the boy get into the room, and then done the same to him as he'd done to the old woman."

"Look here, Olivier. When you got home this morning, was the light on?"

"Yes."

"In the boy's room?"

"Yes. It was the first thing I noticed. It gave me a shock. I thought perhaps he was ill."

"So the murderer very likely saw it and feared his crime had had a witness. He certainly wouldn't have expected anyone to climb up the drainpipe. He must have rushed straight out of the house."

"And waited outside to see what would happen."

Guesswork! Yes. But that was all they could do. The important thing was to guess right. For that you had to put yourself in the other chap's place and think as he had thought. The rest was a matter of patrols, of the hundreds of policemen scattered all over Paris, and, lastly, of luck.

"Rather than go down the way he'd come, the boy must have left the house by the entrance in the Rue Michat."

"Just a moment, Inspector. By that time he probably knew that his father wasn't the murderer."

"Why?"

"Janvier said just now that Madame Fayet lost a lot of blood. If it had been his father, the blood would have had time to dry up more or less. It was some nine hours since Francois had seen him in the room. It was on leaving the house that he found out who had done it, whether it was Loubet or not. The latter wouldn't know whether the boy had seen him up in the room. Francois would have been scared and taken to his heels."

This time it was the boy's father who interrupted.

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"No. Not if he knew there was a big reward offered. Not if he knew I'd lost my job. Not if he'd seen me go to the old woman to borrow some money."

The Inspector and Andre Lecœur exchanged glances. They had to admit Olivier was right, and it made them afraid.

No, it had to be pictured otherwise. A dark, deserted street in an outlying quarter of Paris two hours before dawn.

On the other hand, the ex-policeman, obsessed by his sense of grievance, who had just committed his ninth murder to revenge himself on the society that had spurned him, and perhaps still more to prove to himself he was still a man by defying the whole police force—indeed, the whole world.

Was he drunk again? On a night like that, when the bars were open long after their usual closing time, he had no doubt had more than ever. And in that dark, silent street, what did he see with his bulging drink-inflamed eyes? A young boy, the first person who had found him out, and who would now—

"I'd like to know whether he's got a gun on him," sighed the Inspector.

Janvier answered at once:

"I asked his wife. It seems he always carries one about. An automatic pistol, but it's not loaded."

"How can she know that?"

"Once or twice, when he was more than usually drunk, he rounded on her, threatening her with the gun. After that, she got hold of his ammunition and locked it up, telling him an unloaded pistol was quite enough to frighten people without his having to fire it."

Had those two really stalked each other through the streets of Paris? A strange sort of duel in which the man had the strength and the boy the speed?

The boy may well have been scared, but the man stood for something precious enough to push fear into the background: a fortune and the end of his father's worries and humiliations.

Having got so far, there wasn't a lot more to be said by the little group of people waiting in the Préfecture de Police. They sat gazing at the street-plan with a picture in their minds of a boy following a man, the boy no doubt keeping his distance. Everyone else was sleeping. There was no one in the streets who could be a help to the one or a menace to the other. Had Loubet produced his gun in an attempt to frighten the boy away?

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When people woke up and began coming out into the streets, what would the boy do then? Would he rush up to the first person he met and start screaming "Murder"?

"Yes. It was Loubet who walked in front," said Saillard slowly.

"And it was I," put in Andre Lecœur, "who told the boy all about the pillar telephone system."

The little crosses came to life. What had at first been mysterious was now almost simple. But it was tragic.

The child was risking his skin to save his father. Tears were slowly trickling down the latter's face. He made no attempt to hide them.

He was in a strange place, surrounded by outlandish objects, and by people who talked to him as though he wasn't there, as though he was someone else. And his brother was among these people, a brother he could hardly recognize and whom he regarded with instinctive respect.

Even when they did speak, it wasn't necessary to say much. They understood each other. A word sufficed.

"Loubet couldn't go home, of course."

Andre Lecœur smiled suddenly as a thought struck him.

"It didn't occur to him that Francois hadn't a centime in his pocket. He could have escaped by diving into the Métro."

No. That wouldn't hold water. The boy had seen him and would give his description.

Place du Trocadéro, the Etoile. The time was passing. It was practically broad daylight. People were up and about. Why hadn't Francois called for help? Anyhow, with people in the streets it was no longer possible for Loubet to kill him.

The Inspector was deep in thought.

"For one reason or another," he murmured, "I think they're going about together now."

At the same moment, a lamp lit up on the wall. As though he knew it would be for him, Lecœur answered in place of Bedeau.

"Yes. I thought as much."

"It's about the two oranges. They've found an Arab boy asleep in the third-class waiting room at the Gare du Nord. He still had the oranges in his pockets. He'd run away from home because his father had beaten him."

"Do you think Bib's dead?"

"If he was dead, Loubet would have gone home, as he would no longer have anything to fear."

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So the struggle was still going on somewhere in this now sunny Paris in which families were sauntering along the boulevards taking the air.

It would be the fear of losing him in the crowd that had brought Francois close to his quarry. Why didn't he call for help? No doubt because Loubet had threatened him with his gun. "One word from you, my lad, and I'll empty this into your guts."

So each was pursuing his own goal: for the one to shake off the boy somehow, for the other to watch for the moment when the murderer was off his guard and give the alarm before he had time to shoot.

It was a matter of life and death.

"Loubet isn't likely to be in the center of the town, where policemen are too plentiful for his liking, to say nothing of the fact that many of them know him by sight."

Their most likely direction from the Etoile was towards Montmartre—not to the amusement quarter, but to the remoter and quieter parts.

It was half past two. Had they had anything to eat? Had Loubet, with his mind set on escape, been able to resist the temptation to drink?

"Monsieur le Commissaire—"

Andre Lecœur couldn't speak with the assurance he would have liked. He couldn't get rid of the feeling that he was an upstart, if not a usurper.

"I know there are thousands of little bars in Paris. But if we chose the more likely districts and put plenty of men on the job—"

Not only were all the men there roped in, but Saillard got through to the Police Judiciaire, where there were six men on duty, and set every one of them to work on six different telephone lines.

"Hallo! Is that the Bar des Amis? In the course of the day have you seen a middle-aged man accompanied by a boy of ten? The man's wearing a black overcoat and a—"

Again Lecœur made little crosses, not in his notebook this time, but in the telephone directory. There were ten pages of bars, some of them with the weirdest of names.

A plan of Paris was spread out on a table all ready and it was in a little alley of ill-repute behind the Place Clichy that the Inspector was able to make the first mark in red chalk.

"Yes, there was a man of that description here about twelve

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o'clock. He drank three glasses of Calvados and ordered a glass of white wine for the boy. The boy didn't want to drink at first, but he did in the end and he wolfed a couple of eggs."

By the way Olivier Lecœur's face lit up, you might have thought he heard his boy's voice.

"You don't know which way they went?"

"Towards the Boulevard des Batignolles, I think. The man looked as though he'd already had one or two before he came in."

"Hallo! Zanzi-Bar? Have you at any time seen a—"

It became a refrain. As soon as one man had finished, the same words, or practically the same, were repeated by his neighbor.

Rue Damrémont. Montmartre again, only farther out this time. One-thirty. Loubet had broken a glass, his movements by this time being somewhat clumsy. The boy got up and made off in the direction of the lavatory, but when the man followed, he thought better of it and went back to his seat.

"Yes. The boy did look a bit frightened. As for the man, he was laughing and smirking as though he was enjoying a huge joke."

"Do you hear that, Olivier? Bib was still there at one-forty."

Andre Lecœur dared not say what was in his mind. The struggle was nearing its climax. Now that Loubet had really started drinking it was just a question of time. The only thing was: would the boy wait long enough?

It was all very well for Madame Loubet to say the gun wasn't loaded. The butt of an automatic was quite hard enough to crack a boy's skull.

His eyes wandered to his brother, and he had a vision of what Olivier might well have come to if his asthma hadn't prevented him drinking.

"Hallo! Yes. Where? Boulevard Ney?"

They had reached the outskirts of Paris. The ex-Sergeant seemed still to have his wits about him. Little by little, in easy stages, he was leading the boy to one of those outlying districts where there were still empty building sites and desolate spaces.

Three police cars were promptly switched to that neighborhood, as well as every available *agent cycliste* within reach. Even Janvier dashed off, taking the Inspector's little car, and it was all they could do to prevent Olivier from running after him.

"I tell you, you'd much better stay here. He may easily go off on a false trail, and then you won't know anything."

Nobody had time for making coffee. The men of the second day

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shift had now thoroughly warmed to the case. Everyone was strung up.

"Hallo! Yes. Orient Bar. What is it?"

It was Andre Lecœur who took the call. With the receiver to his ear, he rose to his feet, making queer signs that brought the whole room to a hush.

"What? Don't speak so close to the mouthpiece."

In the silence, the others could hear a high-pitched voice.

"It's for the police! Tell the police I've got him! The killer! Hallo? What? Is that Uncle Andre?"

The voice was lowered a tone to say shakily: "I tell you, I'll shoot, Uncle Andre."

Lecœur hardly knew to whom he handed the receiver. He dashed out of the room and up the stairs, almost breaking down the door of the room.

"Quick, all cars to the Orient Bar, Porte Clignancourt."

And without waiting to hear the message go out, he dashed back as fast as he'd come. At the door he stopped dead, struck by the calm that had suddenly descended on the room.

It was Saillard who held the receiver into which, in the thickest of Parisian dialects, a voice was saying:

"It's all right. Don't worry. I gave the chap a crack on the head with a bottle. Laid him out properly. God knows what he wanted to do to the kid. What's that? You want to speak to him? Here, little one, come here. And give me your popgun. I don't like those toys. Why, it isn't loaded."

Another voice. "Is that Uncle Andre?"

The Inspector looked round, and it was not to Andre but to Olivier that he handed the receiver.

"Uncle Andre. I got him."

"Bib! It's me."

"What are you doing there, Dad?"

"Nothing. Waiting to hear from you. It's been—"

"You can't think how bucked I am. Wait a moment, here's the police. They're just arriving."

Confused sounds. Voices, the shuffling of feet, the clink of glasses. Olivier Lecœur listened, standing there awkwardly, gazing at the wall-map which he did not see, his thoughts far away at the northern extremity of Paris, in a windswept boulevard.

"They're taking me with them."

Another voice. "Is that you, Chief? Janvier here."

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One might have thought it was Olivier Lecœur who had been knocked on the head with a bottle by the way he held the receiver out, staring blankly in front of him.

"He's out, right out, Chief. They're lugging him away now. When the boy heard the telephone ringing, he decided it was his chance. He grabbed Loubet's gun from his pocket and made a dash for the phone. The proprietor here's a pretty tough nut. If it hadn't been for—"

A little lamp lit up in the plan of Paris.

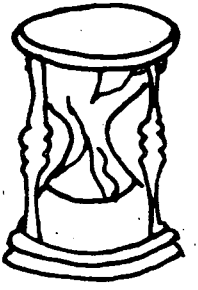
"Hallo! Your car's gone out?"

"Someone's smashed the glass of the pillar telephone in the Place Clignancourt. Says there's a row going on in a bar. I'll ring up again when we know what's going on."

It wouldn't be necessary.

Nor was it necessary for Andre Lecœur to put a cross in his notebook under Miscellaneous.

—translated by Geoffrey Sainsbury



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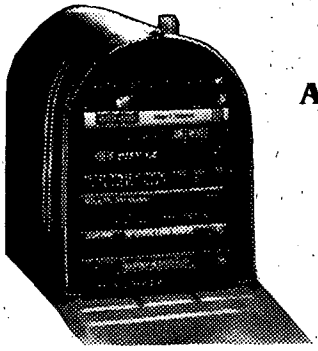

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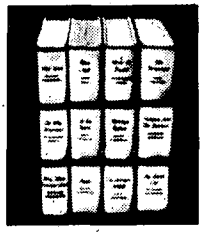

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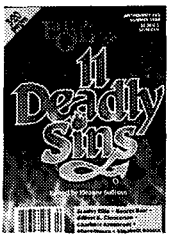

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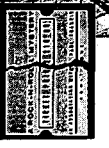

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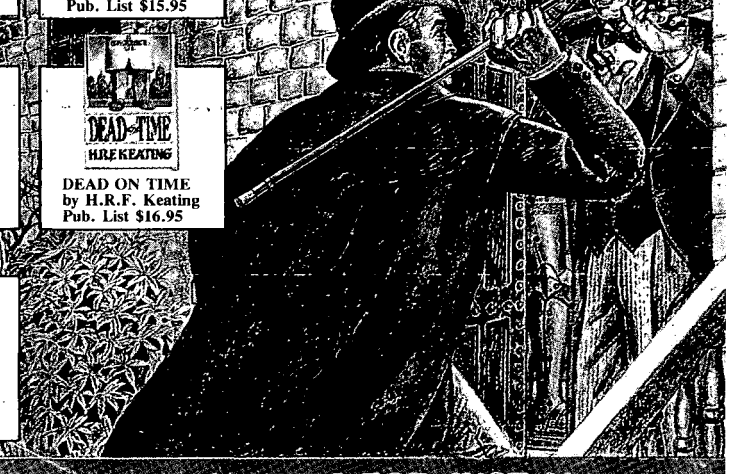

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